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The Concept of Authority in the Church

Roger W. Nostbakken

Introduction

Christ's church is not a society of equals as if all the faithful in it had the same rights; but it is a society in which not all are equal. And this is so not only because some of the faithful are clerics and some laymen, but especially because in the Church there is the power of divine institution by which some are authorized to sanctify, teach and govern and others do not have this authority. Since, however, there is a twofold power in the Church, one called the power of orders and the other called the power of jurisdiction. We teach with regard to this latter power in particular, that it is absolute and perfectly complete, legislative, judicial and coercive, and that it pertains not only to the internal and sacramental forms but also to the external and public. The subjects of this power are the pastors and teachers appointed by Christ; and they exercise it freely and independently of any secular control; and, therefore, with all authority (see Titus 2:15), they rule the Church of God with laws that are necessary and binding in conscience, with judicial decrees and, finally, with salutary punishments for offenders even though they are unwilling; and this applies not only in matters of faith and morals, of worship and of sanctification, but also in those matters which pertain to the external discipline and administration of the church. Hence we must believe Christ's church is a perfect society. This true and highly favored church of Christ is none other than the one, holy, catholic, apostolic and Roman Church.¹

So spoke the Vatican Council of 1869-70. It is over against such an absolutist and authoritarian view of the church that Lutheranism generally stakes out its position. One thing we are all sure of is that we do not hold theoretically or doctrinally to such a position. We are also careful in our statements to reject the pre-suppositions upon which such a view is predicated, namely, a qualitative distinction between clergy and laity and the assumption that there is an unbroken line of succession from Christ through the apostolate to the existing clerical order.

We also affirm that our primary authority is the Scripture and that all other authority in the church is subordinate to that. We therefore assign only *relative* authority to ecclesiastical organization or to statements made by councils or synods or assemblies. We are reminded of Luther's insistence that, "Popes and councils can and do err". (Lutherans have traditionally made a distinction between the Scripture as *norma normans* and the statements of the church as *norma normata*.) Further, in affirming the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of believers, Lutherans generally tend to see a functional rather than a qualitative separation between clergy and lay.

In spite of these elements which, since the Reformation, have been held in common within Protestantism the fact remains that there are substantial differences among us with respect to the way in which we both understand and practice the exercise of authority in the church. The paper is divided into three sections: I. The concept of authority in the Lutheran Church, II. The authority and purpose of confessional statements, III. The nature of authority.

My principal thesis is that the only valid basis of authority in the church is an evangelical authority, i.e. an authority of the Gospel.

I. The Concept of Authority in the Lutheran Church

A . In all confessional and constitutional statements Lutherans affirm the primary authority of the Scripture:

- 1 . "We wished indeed to lead our churches and schools, first of all to the fountains of Holy Scripture, and to the Creeds, *and then* to the Augsburg Confession" (Preface to the *Book of Concord*).
- 2 . "They condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Spirit comes to men without the external word, through their own preparation and works" (*Augsburg Confession*, Article V).
- 3 . "Both the Sacraments and word are effected by reason of the institution and command of Christ, notwithstanding they be administered by evil men" (*Augsburg Confession*, Article VIII).
- 4 . "... and the Holy Scriptures alone remain the only judge, rule, and standard, according to which, as the only test-stone all dogmas shall and must be discerned and judged, as to whether they are good or evil, right or wrong" (Preface to the *Formula of Concord*).

In these and similar statements which state formally and officially the position of the Lutheran Church it is maintained

that all authority in the church derives ultimately from Jesus Christ the Lord of the church and this authority is exercised in the church principally through her allegiance to the Scripture.

Everywhere the Confessions assume they stand under the Scriptures as normative. The one thing that emerges with fundamental clarity from a reading of the Lutheran Confessions is their studied attempt faithfully and truly to present and proclaim the heart of the Scriptures. Every position, every approach is judged over against Scripture, which is everywhere regarded as the authoritative norm.

This position is taken quite self-consciously over against that which vests authority in the teaching office of the church or in the private judgment of a person's conscience. (Luther rejected both Roman Catholic authoritarianism and Anabaptist individualism.)

The relationship between Confession and Scripture is thus seen as subordinate and dynamic. It is subordinate in that the authority of Confession stands in a derivative relation to Scripture, dynamic in that Confession as a human response to the word of Scripture is never a final and complete word but is always proximate and fallible, and for that reason open to change, revision and expansion. In this respect it is also understood that the Confessions teach nothing *new*; they represent what the Scripture teaches, albeit in different ways at different periods in history. But for an evangelical church the Gospel is the basis of and constituent of all authority.

B . The Gospel is the Normative Center of Scripture.

The Confessions do not call attention to nor use the Scripture superficially. i.e. they do not speculate about their origin or manner of writing, but consistently appeal to their *content* and *intent*. The Confessions assume the Scriptures to be the Word of God in written form and as such the heart of Scripture is the Gospel.

The Gospel then is a kind of norm within the Scripture, it is the interpretive key to the Scriptures. Article V of the *Formula of Concord* which treats of Law and Gospel argues for a proper distinction between the two and it in effect says that Law is "all that which terrifies conscience, and Gospel is that which consoles conscience through the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins." For example: "For the Gospel proclaims

the forgiveness of sins... and lest repentance or the terrors of the Law turn into despair, the preaching of the Gospel must be added, that it may be a repentance unto salvation 2 Cor. 7,10.”

This is consistent with the position taken by Luther who argued that Christ was the Lord and King of Scripture and is the clue through which Scripture is understood. As Paul Althaus has expressed it:

For Luther the... Scripture interprets itself in terms of Christ as its center, that is Christo-centrally....One can formulate Luther's principle thus: Scripture is always to be interpreted according to the analogy of Scripture. And this is nothing else than the analogy of the gospel.²

For Luther the key to Scripture and the ultimate base of its authority was this fundamental Christo-centricity. The intention of Scripture is to proclaim salvation. Therefore, when “our opponents produce from Scripture [passages] regarding works and rewards,” he advises one to reply to them:

Here is Christ, and over there are the statements of Scripture about works. But Christ is Lord over Scripture....I for my part stress the Lord, who is the King of Scripture. He has become my merit and the price of my righteousness and salvation. I hold to Him....You are also safe in the sight of God; for your heart is fixed on the object of faith, who is called Christ (*Luther's Works*, Am. ed., 26:294-6).

This principle of the Gospel as the normative center of the Scripture, though often forgotten in practice, is generally affirmed with consistency in Lutheran theology. C.F.W. Walther, a theologian of major importance to 19th century North American Lutheranism, delivered a series of 39 lectures on Law and Gospel in 1884-1885. He propounded 25 theses in which he urged a proper Biblical distinction between Law and Gospel and a discriminating proclamation of them. His lectures are remarkable for their positive and evangelical emphasis and he closely reflects the historic Lutheran insistence on the centrality of the Gospel. In his 25th thesis he asserts: “... the Word of God is not rightly divided when the person teaching it does not allow the Gospel to have a general predominance in his teaching.”³ He goes on to insist that the burden of Jesus' message and ministry is the Gospel and this characterizes all of Scripture. “But the Law is merely an auxiliary doctrine; it is not the real doctrine of Christ.”⁴ As he concludes his lectures

to pastors he says, "God grant that some day people may say about you that you are preaching well, but too sweetly! Do not hold forth with the Law too long; let the Gospel follow promptly."⁵

From this it is evident that *for historic Lutheranism the concept of authority as it is rooted in the Scriptures is in turn based on the Gospel as the central force and interest of Scripture*. This naturally suggests some important implications for the *exercise* of authority in the church. This is especially relevant to an evangelical understanding of Confessional authority.

C . Confessional Authority is Derivative, Reflective and Interpretative.

As has been pointed out the authority of Confessions is proximate. If the primary authority rests in the Scripture it follows that the authority of Confessions or other statements made by people has to do with the relation of those statements to the Scripture. In other words confessional authority is predicated on the Confession being a faithful reflection and interpretation of the Scripture and principally of the Gospel as the center of Scripture. For Luther this was a cardinal issue. He was to insist on the authority of Creeds and Confessions over against the Anabaptists and the enthusiasts. However, he did so not because credal statements were issued by the authoritative voice of the church, but because such statements were in consonance with the Scripture.

We on our part confess that there is much that is Christian and good under the papacy....For instance, we confess that in the Papal church there are the true Holy Scriptures, true baptism, the true sacrament of the altar, the true keys to the forgiveness of sins, the true office of the ministry, the true catechism in the form of the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Articles of the Creed (*Luther's Works*, Am. ed., 40:23; 26:24).

Luther thus on the matter of the authority of tradition in the church maintained the position that the consensus of the church in a doctrine or action is binding insofar as it is not contrary to Scripture. And on this latter point Luther understood the Scripture not in a Biblicist sense, but again in terms of the Gospel which is its center.

The crucial issue here is the understanding of the way in which the Confession is in agreement with the Scripture. If

the Confession is understood as being a representative of the Scripture then it must have the same authority as Scripture. If on the other hand the Confession is understood as being a reflection or interpretation of Scripture then its authority is secondary. At this point it is important to emphasize that the normative character of a Confession must reflect the normative character of the Scripture, namely the Gospel.

When we talk then about the *derivative* and *secondary* authority of Confession and tradition it must indeed be recognized as precisely that. The authority of church and Confession is conditional. Luther once said:

Let all obedience be damned to the depth of hell which obeys the government, father, mother, or even the church in such a way that it disobeys God. At this point I know neither father, mother, friendship, government or the Christian Church (W.A. 28.24).

The condition is, as we have said, the Confession's reflection, interpretation and re-presentation of the Gospel. Authority then in the church is relative inasmuch as the interpretations may be in error; it is binding, however, inasmuch as it is a true and faithful reflection of the Word of God. As Bonhoeffer expresses it:

We hear the Word of God in the word of the Church and this qualifies the Church's authority...Once the Church has spoken authoritatively... then I as a dogmatist... have only a relative freedom in respect to this matter... I am relatively bound in my ideas on dogmatics, my confession of faith, and so on. I owe relative obedience to the Church; it has the right to demand from me a *sacrificium intellectus* and perhaps upon occasion even a *sacrificium conscientiae*.⁶

Again repeating the same point:

The Councils and Synods have relative authority and should most vigorously and emphatically assert it, and plainly and clearly say what their standpoint is towards the Bible, dogma, the creed and doctrine, and then there will be no longer cause for them to lament the world's indifference. But the Church must know that its authority is still a derived and reflected authority.⁷

D . Confessions are Witnesses to the Gospel and as Such are Binding.

Having said the foregoing it is now possible to assert that for Lutherans while the Confessions have a derivative, relative and secondary authority. they nevertheless do have a binding

authority for the Church. Lest this be understood as double talk it is important to remember that such authority is predicated on the assumption that the Confessions are in fact a faithful *summary* of Scripture and witness *to the Gospel*.

This of course is what the Confessions present themselves as being, i.e. an acknowledgement and affirmation of what God says to people in the Scriptures. Accordingly:

The Confession does not in the first instance determine what is *to be* taught, but sums up what *is* taught in the Church. It does not determine what kind of statements the Bible contains, but which statements are made on the basis of the Bible...⁸

The authority of Confessions is predicated further on the assumption that the Holy Spirit is operative in the church moving her to confess her faith at certain decisive points in history. This means that confessions are the consensus of the church not simply the statements of individuals. Therefore one places oneself under the authority of the Confession unless, or until, one feels that as a matter of "Scripture and right reason" one cannot do so. It is then one's responsibility as a theologian to argue for a Confessional statement, or perhaps such changes in Confessional statement as will be consistent with one's understanding of the Gospel. If one is successful in achieving consensus on one's point, one's responsibility will have been discharged; if unsuccessful, then in all good conscience one must re-examine one's position.

The church must operate on the basis of consensus in Confessional matters. There is no such thing as absolute authority for Confessional statements; the authority is the relative one of consensus. However, that does not make it only relatively binding. It is relative in the sense that it stands under the judgment of Scripture, but it is binding inasmuch as it represents the consensus of the church's understanding of Scripture on given matters. The authority of Confession relates to the Confession as summary of the Scripture. The Confession in this sense binds the church to the proclamation of the Gospel and it is the Gospel which gives the Confession its obligatory character.

For this reason as well a Confession is binding not simply for the historical period in which it is written but universally inasmuch as it is a summary of the Scripture.

The question may be raised, "What then distinguishes such Confessional authority from that of the Roman Church?" The answer clearly is that the Confessions are not regarded as absolute authorities. Their statements are always open to challenge. It is in fact the theological responsibility of the church to be continually and critically reflecting upon the statements which she makes in terms of their relation to the Gospel. Not to do this is to fail to understand the relationship of Confession to Scripture. The fact that historically this has normally not been done points up two tendencies: (1) the tendency to drift to an absolutist Confessional position (rigid objectivism); (2) the tendency to drift towards an individualistic and sectarian view of Confessions (self-righteous subjectivism). Neither takes seriously the relative authority of Confession.

II. The Purpose of Confessional Statements

The purpose of a Confessional statement is twofold. Primarily it is the positive one of mutually confessing the faith of the church in as clear, unambiguous and helpful a way as possible. Implicit in this is the responsibility of providing interpretation and guidance for the church in her self-understanding and for her understanding of her role in the world. Secondly the purpose is the negative one of defining the doctrine of the church over against error in those forms which threaten the Gospel.

A. A Word of Response

Fundamentally, a Confession is an act of witness. It is a word which the church speaks in response to the word spoken to it by God. It is intended to be the voice of the whole church. A Confession can be understood as a word of clarification and encouragement which the church addresses to herself; and as a word of witness addressed to the world at large.

It is within the word of clarification and witness that there are implicitly those negative elements which distinguish the faith of the church from other faiths and other positions. As the members of the church are in constant dialogue with one another respecting their faith there arise opportunities and needs to agree on those statements which can provide essential clarity of understanding for the membership of the church. When some member of the family advances a position which disturbs

(or conflicts with) the understanding of the other members of the family then the differences must be resolved by discussion under the authority of Scripture.

As far as those outside the family of the church are concerned the Confessional statements are intended to be assertions of what is held in consensus by the church. This provides a standard by which the person outside the church can evaluate his/her position. It also provides a prophetic word over against other words and other perspectives which prevail in society. It is an ongoing responsibility for the church to speak the reconciling, humanizing and restraining words in a world which always stands in need of reconciliation, humanity and restraint.

B. The Church's Protection Against Error

The purpose of Confessional statements is also apparent in the church's need to define her theology over against error. This is both a negative and a positive task. It is negative in that it involves the specific rejection of particular formulations of doctrine. It is positive in that it requires the kind of statement which can resolve the current issues of dispute and contribute an enlarged perspective in the church's understanding of a given issue.

An obvious illustration is provided by the formulation which led to the present Niceano-Constantinopolitan Creed. Threatened with a theology which diminished the Biblical view of Jesus Christ, the church was forced not only specifically to reject the formulation of Arius but to state in a fuller form her consensus on the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Imperfect and cumbersome as the resultant creed has proved it has remained an important and fundamental Christian Confession. Negatively it prevented the erosion of Biblical Christology. Positively it affirmed the church's determination to bear undiminished witness to the Lord of the Scriptures.

This negative/positive balance in the church's attempt to guard against error is, however, a very precarious one. When the negative is over-emphasized the church's confession is distorted in the direction of an authoritarian rigidity which does not allow for the freedom to exercise critical reflection on the church's statements. The eventual result of such a posture is

an arid and sterile docility which loses touch both with the life of the Scriptures and the world in which the church exists.

When the positive is over-balanced a casualness of spirit develops which permits theology to degenerate into a kind of extension of humanism. This will in turn issue in an essentially immanent theology which finds its focus in humankind and not God. The failure to appreciate critical theology presupposes a view of humankind which assumes a greater comprehension than actually prevails.

III. The Nature of Authority

In this final section I should like to take up briefly the question of the nature of authority. This, I think, is one of the most important and difficult questions in any discussion of the authority of the church. The most common understanding of authority is that which reflects its traditional meaning as "the power or right to give commands and require obedience". Implicit in this traditional understanding is the power of coercion and the exercise of discipline. Implicit in this also is the paternalistic notion of a superior order or level which instructs and commands those at a lower level and imposes the discipline of reproof and corrections where necessary.

Historically in the church authority has been understood primarily in this coercive and disciplinary way. Authority has been exercised in the church principally at those points where heresy or disorder has threatened the life of the church. But this means that authority is conceived primarily in negative terms as that power which restrains, reprovcs and corrects. Authority is then essentially a conservative power, it puts on the brakes, it safeguards, it limits, it is that action by which the church prevents a person or movement from going too far.

To understand authority in this way, however, gives little place to its *positive* character. In the New Testament the principal word from which our English word derives is *exousia*. Power is implicit in this word too, but a power which derives ultimately from God. And the exercise of that power is not seen as a primarily negative or restrictive or limiting exercise.

Perhaps one of the most striking usages of the word is found in Matthew 7:29 where it is recorded that Jesus taught "as one having authority" (*exousian echōn*). The force of that passage

is not that Jesus was exercising *control* over people or that he was *imposing demands* on them or limiting their expression in any way. Rather the point is that by the very creative power of his person, Jesus spoke with that authority which elicited respect and response. The scribes also had an authority but it was purely the legal authority of position. They based their remarks on the tradition of what had been said before. Jesus spoke *with* authority, out of his own person, and his words do not *demand* or *require* a response, rather they *call forth* a response.

In the church where we talk about authority we normally talk about it as that power which issues from a legal position. Power is a term normally associated with the person or institution in a legal position to exercise power. In the church, therefore, power, authority and law are terms which go together. We do not talk much about the authority of the Gospel or of the authority of the church as resting primarily in the Gospel rather than the Law.

It seems to me that to a certain extent we have in the church abdicated the position of authority which is founded in the Gospel and functioned primarily with an authority founded in the Law. The *intention* of a *Confession* is to make a clear, positive and inviting statement of the church's faith. Involved in doing this are the sometimes necessary actions of rejecting certain points of view. But a Confession remains, in intention at least, a positive statement which leads rather than blocks, which affirms rather than negates. This would suggest that the authority of the church should be exercised principally in a positive way and negatively only incidentally. We have here, I believe, as I indicated at the beginning of this section, a question of fundamental importance and it is one to which I hope we can give some attention in our discussion.

Notes

1. "The Power of the Church," chapter 10 of The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, the Vatican Council 1869-70, in *The Church Teaches* (N.Y.: Herder and Herder, 1955).
2. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, tr. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 79.
3. C.F.W. Walter, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (1897), tr. W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia, 1928), 403.

4. *Ibid.*, 405.
5. *Ibid.*, 411f.
6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints*, tr. Ronald Gregor Smith et al (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1963), 173-4.
7. *Ibid.*, 174.
8. Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, tr. Paul F. Koehneke and Herbert J.A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 13.