My concern in what follows is to set forth, in outline, an understanding of the sources of religious authority that I take to stand in essential continuity with that of revisionary Protestantism. To do this I shall first develop the understanding of the sources of authority typical of classical Protestantism, or, if you will, the Protestantism of the Reformation. Against this background, then, I shall indicate the changes called for in this classical understanding by the typically revisionary Protestant approach and method, as well as by the results to which they may now be said to have led. Finally, I shall outline the understanding of the sources of religious authority that I myself take to be required of an adequate Christian theology today.

## I

It is clear that the authority that classical Protestantism claims for scripture is more than a merely *de facto* authority. The point of the Reformers' scriptural principle, *sola scriptura*, is not simply that scripture in fact *is* uniquely authoritative because they and others recognize it to be so, but that it by right *ought to be* thus authoritative whether they or others recognize its authority or not.

But thus to claim that scripture's authority is *de jure*, that it has a *right* to be recognized as authoritative, not only by Christians but by all human beings whatever, necessarily implies that some pre-existing reality confers that right upon it. It is true of any *de jure* authority, such as Protestants have classically claimed scripture to be or to have, that its right to control the self-understanding and life-praxis of persons presupposes some reality conferring this right and thus authorizing it as an authority. In this sense, all *de jure* authority is by logical necessity authorized authority, or, as we may also say, an authority that perforce derives from a source beyond itself. In general, then, one can speak of someone or something being or having an authority, as distinct from the sheer power to control the self-understanding or life-praxis of persons, only when the authority ultimately stands on the same level as those over whom he, she, or it has authority *vis-à-vis* the source whence that authority derives. Thus, for instance, both the accused, who is subject to the authority of the court, and the court itself stand under the

same laws and rules of justice, which, as the source of the court's authority, are as binding on its verdict as they are on the actions of the accused. Or, again, the authority of a teacher derives entirely from the methods of inquiry and procedures of verification of some particular discipline, which she or he, as much her or his students, is obliged to follow.

What is thus true of *de jure* authority in general, however, is also true of religious authority, at least as classical Protestantism has understood it. On this understanding, both the magisterium, or teaching authority, of the church and its particular tradition of doctrine and discipline derive such authority as they have from scripture and, therefore, ultimately stand on the same level in relation to scripture as those over whom they are or have such authority. Moreover, not even scripture is understood to be an exception to this rule when it, in turn, is claimed to be or to have a unique religious authority; for, according to the so-called material principle of the Reformers, scripture, too, is or has only a derived authority in that it is Christ alone (*solus Christus*) who authorizes scripture as the *norma normans, sed non normata.* Just because scripture is uniquely normative over such other norms as tradition or the magisterium, it itself ultimately stands on the same level as those who are subject to its authority *vis-à-vis* Jesus Christ.

One implication of this understanding needs to be stressed, since it is important for a clear grasp of just what is meant by the phrase, "source of authority." Contrary to a widely prevalent misunderstanding, it is no part of the authority that classical Protestantism claims for scripture, or for any derived religious authority, to deprive those who are subject to it of their own rights and responsibilities. This is so far from true, in fact, that the right of any religious authority, including scripture, to control the self-understanding and life-praxis of those under it necessarily implies their right and responsibility, in turn, to control it—namely, by their own immediate experience of the reality that alone authorizes it insofar as it is or has any *de jure* authority at all. In this sense, any religious authority is by its very nature not only an authority that *is* authorized, in that it derives from a source beyond itself, but also an authority that *is to be* authorized by controlling its right to control through immediate experience of the still higher

authority, or source of authority, whence it derives. In traditional terms, any religious norm is not only *norma normata* but also *norma normanda*: it is a "norm that *is* normed" insofar as it has already proved itself through the experience of those who stand under it and have thus controlled its right to control them; and it is a "norm that *is to be* normed" insofar as this right does not exclude but presupposes their continuing right and responsibility to control it through their own immediate experience of the source of its authority.

Because this is so, however, the phrase, "source of authority," is evidently systematically ambiguous in that it refers both to the *objective reality* that confers a given authority—scripture, say, in relation to tradition and the magisterium, or Jesus Christ in relation to scripture—and to the *subjective experience* of this reality as thus conferring such authority—say, the experience of scripture as authorizing tradition and the magisterium, or the experience of Jesus Christ as authorizing scripture. To be sure, the question has been raised—notably by Paul Tillich—whether experience is properly regarded as a *source* of authority or, rather, as Tillich himself proposes, as the *medium* thereof. But this distinction is not easy to maintain, as Tillich's own example makes clear, and there is nothing in the classical Protestant position on the question that seems to require it. Therefore, I prefer to distinguish, instead, between two different but closely related senses of "source of authority": an *ontic* sense, in which it refers to the pre-existing reality that authorizes a certain authority; and a *noetic* sense, in which it refers to the immediate experience of that reality as authorizing the authority. That both senses of the phrase are, in fact, implied by the classical Protestant understanding of the sources of authority is evident from Luther's well-known words in his Preface to the Epistle of James: "All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and push Christ. That is the true test, by which to judge all books, when we see whether they push Christ or not, since all the scriptures show us Christ (Rom 3), and St. Paul will know nothing but Christ (1 Cor 15). What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul taught it; again what preaches Christ would be apostolic even though Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod did it." Clearly, if the "true test" of scriptural authority is not simply Christ but *our seeing* that Christ is preached or taught, our own experience of

Christ as authorizing scripture is itself a source—specifically, the noetic source—of scripture's authority.

But if even scripture's authority is thus derived from ongoing Christian experience of Christ himself, what of classic Protestantism's claim that scripture is the norm that norms but is not normed? The answer, I submit, is that this claim is intended to distinguish scripture from all other recognized norms, not to deny that it itself is normed and is to be normed, in relation to Jesus Christ. Given the material principle of *solus Christus*, scripture is and must be like any other religious authority in deriving its authority from a source beyond itself. In this sense, it, too, is and must be a norm that is normed and is to be normed. But since what authorizes scripture, insofar as it is authorized, is immediate experience of Jesus Christ himself, there is also an important sense in which it is *not* normed—namely, not by any other religious norm, properly so-called. Scripture is unlike all other religious authorities in that what authorizes it is not itself a religious authority in the literal sense of the words. This implies, of course, that, from the standpoint of Christian belief, experience of Christ, or of the God whom he decisively re-presents, neither is nor has a religious authority—not, at any rate, in the same literal sense, as distinct from such analogical sense as the same words may be given in speaking of the authority of the Son as sent by the Father or of the authority of Christian experience of Jesus Christ as empowered by the Holy Spirit. But this implication is to be accepted and insisted on for the reasons well expressed by Luther: "Neither doth Christ give grace and peace as the Apostles gave and brought the same unto men by preaching the Gospel; but he giveth it as the Author and Creator. The Father createth and giveth life, grace, peace, and all other good things. The self-same things also the Son createth and giveth." Although Christ, or God, is indeed the primal ontic *source* of all religious authority, it is misled and misleading to say in any literal sense that (as one recent writer puts it) "Christianity recognizes only one absolute authority—that of God himself." Correspondingly, Christian experience of Christ, or God, although the primal *noetic* source of all religious authority, cannot itself be said to be such an authority in any literal sense of the words.

Such, in brief summary, is the classical Protestant position on the sources of religious authority. In keeping with its formal principle, *sola scriptura*, it recognizes scripture alone, or, more exactly, immediate experience of scripture alone, as the primary authority for faith, witness, and theology. Consequently, such other authorities as it recognizes, whether the tradition of the church or its magisterium, are all understood to be derived authorities, whose source of authority is the immediate experience of scripture, by which they are all authorized and are again and again to be authorized. However, being itself a religious authority in the proper sense of the words, the immediate experience of scripture neither is nor could be the *primal* source of such authority. That source, rather, is, ontically, Jesus Christ, or the triune God whom he reveals, and, noetically, the immediate experience of God as thus revealed through the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. Thus, although classical Protestantism may indeed be said to acknowledge more than one source of religious authority, it also insists on the unique authority of the experience of scripture and only one primal source of authority in the immediate experience of God as decisively re-presented through Jesus Christ.

## II

The question now is as to the changes called for in this classical Protestant understanding by the typical approach and method of revisionary Protestant theology. As much as revisionary theologians may legitimately claim continuity with the Reformers, theirs is a significantly different theology—for at least two basic reasons, both of which derive from its own defining characteristics as a theological position.

The first reason follows from revisionary theology's characteristic commitment to a thoroughgoing historical approach to the theological task. To be sure, it has sometimes been claimed that classical Protestantism itself already executed the breakthrough to a consistent historical treatment of the traditional sources of religious authority. But this claim has been effectively countered by observing that the Reformers by no means applied the same historical criticism typical of their treatment of the church's tradition and magisterium also to the writings of scripture. In any event, there can be no question

either that revisionary theology has taken a historical-critical approach even to the understanding of scripture or that the continued pursuit of this approach for some two centuries has led to results that make classical Protestantism as well as Protestant orthodoxy untenable theological positions.

The point at issue is the classical Protestant scriptural principle. Essential to the *sola scriptura* is a distinction in principle, not merely in fact, between scripture as the sole primary religious authority and such other derived authorities as the tradition of the church and its magisterium. Yet the more historical criticism has been applied to scripture, both as such and in its individual writings, and the more the methods of such criticism have been developed and refined, the clearer it has become that this classical distinction is groundless. Once we recognize that the canon as such is the product of the decisions of the early church over a period of two to three centuries and that none of the New Testament writings can be said to be apostolic in the sense in which they have traditionally been held to be so, the conclusion is unavoidable that the distinction between scripture, on the one hand, and tradition and magisterium, on the other, is at most a distinction in fact, not a distinction in principle. Consequently, if canon there be, in the sense of the *norma normans, sed non normata,* it cannot be scripture as such, or even the New Testament as such, that is the locus of that canon.

The other basic reason for the significant difference of revisionary Protestantism derives from the systematic theological method characteristic especially of its earlier and formative, so-called liberal, phase. Essential to this method, of course, are all the methods of historical-critical understanding that naturally became applicable given a historical approach to theological reflection. But the earlier revisionary theologians were typically well aware of the important logical difference between historical and systematic modes of argument, and thus of the essential insufficiency of all merely historical methods for systematic theology.

This point needs to be stressed because it has frequently been obscured or denied. Thus it is often said that the underlying motive of the earlier revisionary quest of the

historical Jesus was to avoid the decision of faith by providing a historical justification for faith's claims. But, as often as this objection is heard, the record, as I read it, calls for a very different conclusion. The real motive of the revisionary quest of Jesus was essentially the same as that of the Protestant Reformers in relativizing all other putative authorities to the real canon of the Christian church, which, for earlier revisionary theologians, was to be located neither in scripture nor in the New Testament but in the Jesus of history. Yet, so far from supposing that, having once discovered the historical Jesus, they would then be able somehow to avoid the decision of faith, most revisionary theologians, at least, were completely clearheaded about the unavoidability of that decision. They recognized that it is one thing to establish that Jesus actually taught and lived a certain understanding of human life but another and very different thing to affirm the truth of that understanding and to resolve to lead one's own life accordingly.

Moreover—and this is the essential point—they realized that, in the nature of the case, no particular religious experience, any more than such authorities as may derive from it, can be a sufficient reason to affirm the meaning and truth of religious utterances. If such utterances are, in fact, meaningful and true, they cannot be so simply because it is historically the case that a particular person or group has actually uttered them. If they are meaningful and true at all, they are so only because, or insofar as, they are also warranted in some way by our common experience and reason, or, at least, our common *religious* experience and reason, simply as human beings.

So the typical method of earlier revisionary systematic theology involved a double appeal—not only to specifically *Christian* experience of ultimate reality, or to such authorities as are derived from it, but also to generically *human* experience of ultimate reality as both confirming and confirmed by specifically Christian religious utterances. There was a certain continuity at this point not only with Protestant orthodoxy but also with the classical Protestantism of the Reformers, both of which allowed that human experience and reason, as well as Christian experience of revelation, are to some extent a source of religious truth. And yet, despite their acknowledgement of so-called natural religion or theology, orthodoxy and classical Protestantism alike insisted on the

strictly limited competence of human experience and reason to establish religious claims. The most they conceived them able to establish is such presuppositions of revelation as the existence of God, the freedom and responsibility of human beings, and God's universal demand for religious and moral obedience. Furthermore, even with respect to such *præambula fidei*, to say nothing of the mysteries of faith itself, they insisted that it is scripture and revelation that must always confirm human experience and reason, never the other way around. The earlier revisionary theologians, on the contrary, typically insisted on the need for a *mutual* confirmation, on the ground that, even if Christian revelation and scripture are the decisive expression of human experience of ultimate reality, only a successful appeal to such experience as all women and men somehow have it can give sufficient assurance that this is so.

Of course, it is just such a theological method that was widely criticized during the later, neo-orthodox phase of revisionary theology's development. In fact, one might almost define neo-orthodoxy as the form of revisionary theology whose theological method involved an attempt to return to the *sola scriptura* and to specifically Christian experience as the sole primal source of religious authority, even while still pursuing a thoroughgoing historical approach to theological reflection. But events eventually removed all doubt that this is, at best, an unstable theological position and that its method is particularly vulnerable in not allowing one to answer the question that the earlier revisionary method was devised to deal with—namely, whether the utterances of Christian revelation and scripture are, after all, meaningful and true because warranted somehow by our common human experience. Consequently, in the subsequent phase of revisionary theology, which is perhaps best described as a genuinely postliberal phase, the ever greater urgency of this question, given the counterclaims of an increasingly postreligious culture, provoked a number of theologians to return to the earlier revisionary method, or something very like it. Whether by way of metaphysical justifications of religious utterances, or by way of merely phenomenological accounts of their meaning and truth, many postliberal theologians conceded the earlier revisionary point that specifically Christian religious utterances must be shown to be warranted somehow by human experience and reason generally.

There are at least two basic reasons, then, why revisionary theology's understanding of the sources of religious authority is significantly different from that of classical Protestantism. Not only has its thoroughgoing historical approach led to relativizing the classical Protestant claim for the unique authority of scripture, but its characteristic method as a systematic theology entails the insistence, directly counter to that of classical Protestantism, that there is not one primal source of religious authority but two—not only specifically Christian experience of God as decisively revealed through Jesus but also common human experience of ultimate reality as originally revealed in our existence as such.

## III

The main issues that now need to be considered are the very two sharply raised by the typical approach and method of earlier revisionary theology and the results to which they now seem to have led. There is, first, the issue of whether there is only one primal source of religious authority or rather two; and then, second, the issue of how one is to determine the specifically Christian experience of God through Jesus that is at least one primal source of all authorized Christian utterances.

However chastened we must be in our expectations for the earlier revisionary method, some of us are convinced that there is no other tenable alternative. We must continue to maintain, even if in a truly postliberal way, that there is not one primal source of religious authority but two: not only specifically Christian experience of God through Jesus but also our experience and understanding of existence simply as human beings, as both confirming and confirmed by the essential utterances of Christian witness. There are two fundamental reasons why, as problematic as it may be, this revisionary position must still be maintained.

The first reason follows from the purely logical point already recognized by the earlier revisionary theologians. In the nature of the case, no authority, properly so-called, can be a sufficient authorization for the meaning and truth of the utterances derived from

it or warranted by it. Unless the utterances of the authority itself are already authorized as meaningful and true by some method other than an appeal to authority, no utterance derived from them or warranted by them can by that fact alone be said to be so. This is not to deny, of course, that an utterance authorized by authority may very well be meaningful and true. The point is simply that, if it is, the fact that it is authorized by authority is not by itself sufficient to make it so. Moreover, I am not in the least disputing that appeal to authority is a common, and, as far as it goes, entirely legitimate, method of forming beliefs. But belief in an utterance is one thing, whether the utterance is meaningful and true, something else; and this difference is such that logically and, therefore, necessarily no utterance believed on authority can be authorized by that fact alone as also worthy of belief.

By the sheer logic of the case, then, there is a necessary limit to any religious authority, and the same is true even of the particular religious experience that is the source of such an authority. Therefore, even if specifically Christian experience must be said to be the explicit primal source of all authorized Christian utterances, it neither is nor could be the sole sufficient authorization for their meaning and truth. If they are, in fact, meaningful and true, they are so only because the particular experience from which they are derived or by which they are warranted both confirms and is confirmed by our common experience simply as human beings.

The second reason for maintaining this position was also recognized by the earlier revisionary theologians. They typically argued, rightly, that just this is the understanding of the sources of authority that is authorized not only by scripture but also by the specifically Christian experience of Jesus as the Christ, which is the explicit primal source of scripture's own authority. Scripture nowhere points to itself as the primal source of religious authority but, rather, identifies that source as, ontically, God's decisive revelation through Jesus and, noetically, apostolic and/or prophetic experience of God's revelation. But not even revelation itself, or such immediate experience of it, is represented as the sole primal source for the meaning and truth of its utterances. It is simply assumed, on the contrary, that these utterances are meaningful and true because

they express explicitly and decisively what anyone to whom they are addressed at least implicitly understands and, but for willful suppression of the truth, would also be led to affirm by her or his own experience and reflection simply as a human being. Thus the Johannine Jesus, for example, is represented as saying, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me; if any man's will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority" (Jn 7:16 f.). Or, again, Paul can represent the method of his own witness of faith by saying, "By the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing" (2 Cor 4:2 ff.).

The argument thus merely outlined can be indefinitely corroborated by a closer analysis and interpretation of scripture and of the understanding of sources of authority implied by the specifically Christian experience that scripture attests. But if this is correct, there is this second fundamental reason for maintaining that there are and must be two primal sources of religious authority that mutually confirm one another—an *explicit* primal source in specifically Christian experience of God through Jesus; and an *implicit* primal source in common human experience of our existence as such. This position commends itself as the only adequate systematic theological position for us today not only for the logical reason adduced by a general philosophy of authority, but also for the theological reason that it is the very position required by the explicit primal source of all specifically Christian authority.

But now this turn in the argument already raises the other main issue that we need briefly to consider. Granted that only our common human experience of ultimate reality can be a sufficient authorization for the meaning and truth of Christian utterances, neither is such experience the sole primal source of these utterances nor can it be a sufficient authorization that they are, in fact, appropriately Christian. Whether or not an utterance is appropriately Christian is determined, not by whether it is or is not confirmed by human experience of ultimate reality in general, but only by whether or not it is derived from, or warranted by, Christian experience of ultimate reality in particular.

The main theological issue today, however, has to do with how one is to go about determining the specifically Christian experience of God through Jesus that is the explicit primal source of all authorized Christian utterances. Of course, for classical Protestantism as well as for orthodoxy, the answer is simple: the experience in question is the apostolic and prophetic experience of Jesus as the Christ directly attested by the New and the Old Testaments respectively. But, as we have seen, it is impossible for us today, given results of historical criticism that by now seem assured, any longer to concur in this answer. We now know not only that the Old Testament is not prophetic in the traditional sense of the word but also that the New Testament is not apostolic in the same traditional sense. We know, in fact, that the New Testament canon, both as such and in its individual writings, itself belongs to the tradition of the church, as distinct from the original witness of the apostles as which it has traditionally been identified. Therefore, if we are still to speak of a canon at all, in the sense determined by the early church's own criterion of apostolicity, we have no choice but to locate it, not in the New Testament as such, to say nothing of the Old, but in the earliest layer of Christian witness accessible to us today by way of historical reconstruction of the tradition of witness lying behind the New Testament writings. My conviction is that we must indeed speak of a Christian canon in this sense, lest there be no way of adequately determining what utterances are and are not appropriately Christian, and that it is precisely the earliest stratum of the church's kerygma—the so-called Jesus-kerygma of the earliest synoptic tradition—that is its locus.

The question may certainly be raised whether the Jesus-kerygma is, in fact, the earliest form of Christian proclamation, and hence the one that the early church's own criterion of apostolicity warrants our recognizing as canonical. But even if the answer to this question should prove to be negative—because, say, a proto-form of the so-called Christ-kerygma is at least as early—the Jesus-kerygma would still retain the only priority I have any intention of claiming for it. For it is in this kerygma that the Jesus who is the subject-term of all Christian witness, and hence the explicit primal ontic source of all specifically Christian authority, is attested without explicit christological predicates—the Christ-kerygma, as Willi Marxsen argues, being merely implicit in the "*that*" of the Jesus-kerygma, as distinct from its "*what*." Because all explicit christological predicates

not only interpret their subject-term but are also, and more fundamentally, interpreted by it, it is the meaning to be discerned precisely in the Jesus-kerygma—in the Jesus to whom it bears witness—by which the appropriateness of all explicit christology and, consequently, all other Christian utterances must finally be determined.

This means, however, that the postliberal position I am here proposing is itself significantly different not only from the positions typical of classical Protestantism and orthodoxy, but also from both of the positions taken subsequently during the two earlier phases of revisionary Protestantism. As was noted above, the canon typically recognized by the earlier liberal theologians was located in the Jesus of history, whose life and teachings as retrievable by historical inquiry were taken to be the real *norma normans, sed non normata*. But, aside from the doubts one must now have, given the nature of our sources, about any attempt to recover the historical Jesus, the decisive objection to this earlier liberal position is that, from the very beginning of the church's existence, the explicit primal source of Christian authority has been, rather, the Jesus experienced by the earliest disciples and attested by their witness of faith, which itself, therefore, is the real Christian canon. It was only because, or insofar as, the writings of the New Testament were—as we now realize, mistakenly—identified as this earliest witness that they were themselves ever taken to have apostolic and, hence, canonical authority. Consequently, even if we today can no longer make this identification, where we must relocate the canon, if we are to apply the same criterion of apostolicity, is not in the so-called historical Jesus, but in the Jesus-kerygma of the earliest church.

Thus to relocate the canon, however, is also to depart significantly from the position widely taken during the later, self-critical phase of revisionary Protestantism that we are accustomed to call "neo-orthodoxy." Although neo-orthodox theologians were typically more consistent than the Reformers in rejecting an orthodox understanding of inspiration, they hardly broke with the traditional understanding of scripture as the canon. The "*Christian* message" to which they typically appealed as the only primal source of Christian authority is, as they were wont to insist, precisely the "*biblical* message." Thus, in determining what is to count as an appropriate Christian utterance by appealing,

finally, to the message of scripture as such, they continued to presuppose the traditional scriptural canon as their real primary authority. On the postliberal, or revised revisionary, position proposed here, however, it is just this that can no longer be presupposed. Merely to determine that an utterance is derived from or warranted by the so-called biblical message is not sufficient to authorize it as a Christian utterance. It is further necessary to determine that the biblical message itself is authorized by the apostolic witness of faith, which is the sole primary authority for determining the appropriateness of Christian utterances.

There remains, of course, on this resolution of the main issues, as much as on any other, what we usually speak of as "the hermeneutical problem." Furthermore, it will be clear that, on this position, this problem is actually the double problem of determining the *two* primal sources of authority for all specifically Christian religious utterances: their implicit primal source, which can be determined only by critically interpreting the whole history of human culture and religion; and their explicit primal source, which can be determined only by critically interpreting not only the entire Christian tradition, including scripture, but also, finally and decisively, the earliest witness of the church, which is, if anything is, the real Christian canon. It would be folly to ignore the magnitude of this problem or to expect more than always only limited success in any attempt to solve it. But if the constitutive utterance of Christian witness is true, and if the whole point of Christian theology, finally, is so to understand the meaning of this utterance as to vindicate its truth, it is this double hermeneutical problem that sets *the* contemporary systematic task; for there can be no such vindication except through continued efforts to show that it is precisely the understanding of human existence enciphered in the utterance that Jesus is the Christ that is authorized by both of the primal sources to which it itself appeals.

Such, at any rate, is the essential position of revisionary Protestantism, and the conclusion argued for here is that this position, more than any other, belongs to the future of Christian theology as well as to its past.