

Here, again, in “Notes on the Doctrine of Authority” (16 January 2001), I assume, mistakenly, that *having* authority, which is all that a phrase like “the paramount authority of Christ” need be taken to mean, is the same as *being an* authority. Unless this mistaken assumption is made, there’s no good reason for my criticism in ¶ 2 that certain passages “obscure my distinction between primal source of authority and authority (or authorities).”

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## Notes on the Doctrine of Authority

1. It seems clear enough that my understanding of authority is yet another variation on the traditional Protestant understanding—at least as set forth in *The Catholicity of Protestantism*: 115-127, 131-140. Indeed, aside from the failure of that traditional understanding to observe the limit of all authority—that no appeal to authority can *eo ipso* settle the question of truth—there is only one main point where my understanding significantly departs from it—namely, its assumption that the canon of scripture is "our primary witness to-day to the original Apostolic Christian faith" (125). But once allow that this assumption can no longer claim "the testimony of scholarship," and that "the apostolic message concerning the Word of God" is, in fact, a canon *before* the scriptural canon, and my understanding logically follows as the only way to continue to uphold the primacy of the apostolic principle (Just how important this principle was to the early fathers is evident from the statement of J. Lawson cited on 124, "To inquire whether tradition or Scripture is the primary authority is to obscure the mind of Irenæus by asking the wrong question. To him both are manifestations of one and the same thing, the *apostolic truth* by which the Christian lives. The authority within the Church is all one, 'the apostolic,' however transmitted.")

2. Significantly, the traditional doctrine requires the same distinction I make between Jesus Christ, or God, on the one hand, and the several witnesses thereto, only one of which—scripture—is primary, on the other. True, if "God Himself as revealed in the work and person of Jesus Christ" is said to be "the ultimate *ground* of authority," as distinct from merely *an* authority, even the primary one (139; italics added), other passages quite obscure my distinction between primal source of authority and authority (or authorities), by speaking of "the paramount authority of Christ, the Word of God" (120), or saying such things as that, "[f]or the Christian Church and for the Christian believer ultimate and absolute authority in matters of faith can and must reside only in the Word of God, who was made flesh," and so on (115; cf. also 126: "The protestant doctrine is that to Christ alone belongs supreme authority in matters of faith; that the Scriptures . . . possess the greatest authority next to the authority of Christ" etc.). But if "the pre-eminence of Christ" is insofar obscured by the traditional doctrine (126), there

is no missing the clear distinction it draws between the authority of scripture as the primary witness and that of all other witnesses, i.e., "the Church of Christ through the ages, spiritually and historically continuous with the Church of the apostolic age" and "enlightened individuals" (117 f.). Although "the apostolic Church and Its Scriptures" is also a "witness," which as such is as lacking as any other witness in "independent authority in the strict sense," still "[i]f the Bible and the Church appear to conflict, then the testimony of our primary witness [*sic!*], recorded in the Apostolic Scriptures, is to be accepted in faith" (118). Note, by the way, that the "primary witness" is not, strictly speaking, "scripture," but rather "the Church of the apostolic age," of whose originally oral message scripture is the written "record" (116: "To Him [*sc.* the Word of God who was made flesh, etc.] bears witness in the first place the Church of the apostolic age, of which He is the living Head."; cf. also 126, where the scriptures are referred to as "embodying the original tradition of the Apostolic Church.>").

3. I also find it significant that the traditional doctrine as here expounded evidently requires something like my distinction between ontic and noetic aspects of (the source of ) authority. This I take to be the point of saying that "a true doctrine of authority must include the parts played both by the one who accepts such authority as binding upon himself in appropriating the truth, and by the Holy Spirit in confirming it" (119; cf. also 118: "The truth revealed by the Word is objective, and absolute. The testimony of the witnesses is also objective, since, once given, it is independent of human apprehension and understanding. But the authority of the Word, and the testimony of the witnesses, are *in vacuo* until and unless they are accepted in faith and confirmed in experience by the Holy Spirit. So accepted and confirmed they become operative and effective in the life of the Church and the individual.")

16 January 2001