

The breadth of the theme for this segment of our conference leaves little likelihood that I could cover the whole in any meaningful way, so I shall concentrate on a subject that seems to me to lie at the very foundation of any effort in religious instruction in our day: the problem of authority. The most pressing question asked of theological educators in this generation is one asked of our Lord himself long before, "By what authority doest thou these things?"¹

The catalogs of our several schools set forth rather clearly the purposes or goals of our religion departments. I quote from the catalog of MVNC: "We believe and teach Christian doctrine with special attention given to the Wesleyan interpretation of Biblical theology that emphasizes holiness of heart and life. We want each student to know what he believes and why he does so."² Each of our schools has some comparable statement. In a practical way, we have sought to influence students to active participation in the life of the church, guided and enforced by theological concepts that rest upon a biblical foundation. The authority for practical rules and admonitions has been derived from creeds and statements of faith that in turn derive their authority from the Bible. Along with other Christian communions we have utilized an authority that rests upon a tripod of Scripture, tradition and reason.³ Elements of this triad have frequently been in conflict. Luther solved the conflict of tradition and

Scripture so decisively that Protestants have often been accused of having a paper pope. Tradition has had valid authority for Protestants only so long as it has been consonant with the written word. A fusion of tradition and Scripture has resulted that has worked so well that much of our church structure rests upon traditional interpretations of biblical motifs.

But times have changed. We are living in a day as momentous as that of the Reformation itself. As Luther under pressure of his opponents kicked the traces of all authority except Scripture, so now young Luthers on every hand are asking "What authority has the Bible? By what right does this ancient book claim power to shape my concepts, determine my ethical decisions, or direct the course of my life?"

Peter Beyerhaus describes this breakdown of biblical authority in a recent article in Christianity Today. A team of scholars working for a commission of the World Council of Churches has been seeking to establish the biblical evidence for salvation for comparison with other documents illustrating the human quest for salvation. Resting upon the two pillars of Scripture and contemporary scene, this effort would replace the formula of Scripture and tradition with a new one: Scripture and situation. The study however has foundered over the inability of the exegetical scholars to settle upon a single basic concept of the Bible's teaching on salvation. They have produced a variety of concepts running parallel to, succeeding or contradicting one another. Beyerhaus concludes that for the ecumenical movement, "the Bible is no longer seen as a solid standard of reference for theological work. Various modern methods used in exegetical work have created a hermeneutical crisis that has destroyed the indispensable conviction of both the unity and

reliability of the Scriptures."⁴

Many of our students come from religious environments that shield them from the winds of negative criticism as their homes shelter them from other destructive currents in our society, but more and more of them are beginning to reflect the tensions and anxieties, both religious and social, that are molding this generation. Can we as teachers of religion speak to them with an authority that will measure up to their own stringent criteria? I suggest tentatively and hopefully that such will be an authority of consensus, of relevance, of competence and of concern.

The Authority of Consensus.-- Consensus is the only ultimate authority of a democratic society, and increasingly the kind of authority that is effective in the church today. This form of authority finds its strength in the delegation of power that finally rests in the people themselves. Of course, it may be argued that "consensus authority" is only a new term for tradition, as implied by a recent writer on the subject of preaching when he says "In practice the feeling of the congregation concerning authority is that it is found in the tradition of what has always been done by everyone everywhere."⁵ It is true that tradition is a form of consensus, and since it may represent a consensus achieved by anguish and with great care by Christians of the past, we must not lightly discard the insights thus gained. The danger is always that we may permit traditional insights to stifle a creative response to the problems that are unique to our own contemporary scene. For those who believe that God has spoken his final word in Christ, consensus can never be an ultimate authority, but we must recognize that there is

great strength in a consensus that fuses the concepts of the past with insights gained from engagement with today's problems.

Specifically, we must convince our students that we bring to bear upon their "existential situation" the light of total Christian experience, past and present. We must broaden the base of our consensus viewpoints. For example, we can no longer ignore Roman Catholic thought which is displaying since Vatican II a growing interest in Scripture study, personal faith in Christ, and witnessing.⁶ Nor can we ignore the new religious programs that have proliferated in the past decade in secular schools. Attempting to find a place for religion as a discipline among the arts and sciences, these programs differ markedly from traditional studies such as our schools offer, primarily in that they are not developed in a context of commitment.⁷ But we must enter into dialog with them. If we are to speak with the authority of consensus, we must then broaden the limits of dialog, and without in any way diminishing our commitment assure our students that we are fulfilling the admonition of St. Paul to prove all things, and "hold fast that which is good."⁸

The Authority of Relevance.-- Another characteristic of authority acceptable to our day is described by that over-worked word relevance. Any commanding voice that speaks to this generation must quickly identify with the conscious problems and the felt needs of today's youth. Here too there lurks a danger. Youth in particular, but not youth alone, tends to identify as relevant that which it wants to hear. But in true prophetic spirit, we must insist that what one ought to hear is just as relevant, or more so, than what one wants to hear. A word that carries the authority of relevance is a word that sheds real light, whether

welcome or not, upon present need. We must without fail make the abiding principles of revelation applicable to the needs of this day. We insist that there are religious principles that are valid now even though the concrete situations that called forth their pronouncement in a distant era have long since vanished. But the burden of proof is upon us. We must apply balm where the pain is felt. We must enunciate the principles that apply to new ethical situations that youth are now facing or will face. The ethical question may be whether to attend a theater or to have an abortion, whether to manipulate an income tax return or utilize mind-altering drugs for therapeutic purposes in mental or nervous disorders; the theologian should speak a word from the eternal Word that gives guidance in the new situations produced by today's technology. Christian physicians and nurses and Christian families alike are caught up in such questions as when and under what circumstances to engage in pre-natal diagnosis, or whether or not to terminate a pregnancy if genetic disorder is indicated.⁹

These and a host of similar questions face us today. Christians cannot afford to let decisions be dictated by amoral technology alone. To refuse to face new questions is to espouse a new sort of Amish mentality, and let the future go its own way without us. If we speak to our day a word that will be heard, we must have the authority of relevance.

The Authority of Competence.-- Competence, too, gives an authority that commands respect in contemporary society. This is the authority wielded by the experienced physician, the research scientist, the skilled technician. Neil Armstrong is an acknowledged authority about the moon because he has been there. If we as teachers of religion are

to be heard, students must feel that we move with as great assurance in our field as the technician does in his. Our task is admittedly more difficult because the mixtures in the test-tube of life do not react so quickly as the chemicals of the laboratory, and the results are not subject to verification by repetition. But we must convince our students that our church doctrines are based upon a rigorous knowledge of the whole Christian experiment and that we ourselves are skillful interpreters of that experiment.

Shall we introduce undergraduate students to the results of critical biblical scholarship? A professor of Bible in a Baptist university wrote in an introduction to a book published in 1944: "Academic procedure should be carefully guarded at every point and as little as possible of higher criticism and theological speculation allowed to enter. In the main these should be reserved for study by students in the theological seminaries."¹⁰ This statement probably reflects a presupposition that underlies much of our own biblical instruction. But if this method was valid in the Forties (and I for one doubt that it was) it cannot be valid for the Seventies, and for students to whom we must make clear the teachings of holiness. We could do our students no greater harm than to send them forth to graduate school or to graduate experiences in life to come to feel subsequently that their professors cherished holiness beliefs because they were unacquainted with the results of scholarship. Rather they should learn in our own classrooms the fundamental results of critical study, and a modicum of its methodological procedure. They should feel that we hold to our convictions the more assuredly because we are in constant dialog with critical scholarship. If we speak with the authority of competence, we can offer our students a more sure foundation for their own faith.

The Authority of Concern.-- The constant reiteration of "love" by the youth of today is often dismaying by its shallowness, but it discloses the feeling that something is lacking in an impersonal, technological society. Youth wants to believe that somebody cares, and care can only be described in terms of personal relationships. This feeling really is a cry for personal warmth, personal fellowship, personal involvement, personal concern. The influence that one can wield if he really cares is a type of authority that will be respected by today's youth. This tells us that we as educators must be more than competent; we must be scholars plus. We must display a concern for our students as persons; and when we do, they will hear us.

In saying this, we have not moved away from a concept of authority; we have rather come full circle to face the very essence of authority, for authority in the end is personal. It is the personal exercise of one who has the ability to accomplish his purposes.¹¹ For Christians, the ultimate authority is Christ. If we can pronounce true precepts based upon true articles of faith derived from the truth of Scripture, it is only because the latter is a true witness to One who said "All authority is given unto me in heaven and on earth." Our authority is found in the remainder of that statement which says "and behold I am with you always to the very ends of the earth." We have authority only as we have a continuing fellowship with Christ, and as teachers of religion, only when we can introduce our students to Him.

NOTES

¹Matthew 21:23.

²MVNC, Catalog for 1972-1974, p. 37.

³Harold O. J. Brown, "The Locus of Authority in the Church," Christianity Today 17.1 (October 13, 1972), p. 7.

⁴Peter P. J. Beyerhaus, "Salvation Today," Christianity Today 17.2 (October 27, 1972), p. 49.

⁵James L. Mechem, "Authority and Freedom in Preaching," Theology Today 19.1 (April 1972), p. 71.

⁶"Tenth Anniversary of Vatican II," Christianity Today 17.1 (October 13, 1972), p. 35.

⁷John F. Wilson, "Ironies," Bulletin of the Council on the Study of Religion 1.2 (October 1970), pp. 3-4.

⁸I Thess. 5:21.

⁹V. Elving Anderson, "Genetic Control and Human Values," a paper read at a meeting of the Institute for Advanced Christian Studies, Ann Arbor, Michigan, October 20-21, 1972.

¹⁰Benjamin Oscar Herring, "Introduction," Studies in the Prophets (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1944).

¹¹Brown, "The Locus of Authority."