

# The Relation of the Holy Spirit to The Authority of the New Testament

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The association of the Holy Spirit with authority comes from the association of the Spirit with the sacred authoritative writings of the Hebrews. Also associated with the authority of the Spirit, from the second century onward, is the authority of the church. A conflict between the first two is rare; the conflict between the second and third is not rare—in the second century it led to the Montanist movement and at the present time may be a contributing factor to the "Pentecostal movement".

In this inquiry we wish to ascertain to what extent authority in the New Testament was attributed, implicitly or explicitly, to the Holy Spirit.

The idea of God speaking to the nation and the world through human instrumentality by an inbreathing of His Spirit was an accepted doctrine in the Jewish world for centuries before the Christian era. Such prophets, in so far as they spoke the divine mind, spoke with authority—it was not their word but God's word. From this the authority of the Scriptures was derived. Jesus, the apostles, and the missionaries to the dispersion could appeal to no higher authority than the Scriptures. We can distinguish in the Jewish-Christian tradition, as MacDonald did in Islam, three sources of authority—(1) The scriptures, (2) reason, and (3) insight or "the Inner Light". Reason played a relatively minor rôle: scriptures and insight are effect and cause respectively of the same phenomenon—i.e., revelation or insight. Both Jews and Christians set up criteria to judge whether a prophet's insight was authentic, *viz.* from God, or not. Authority, then, came from God, through God's Spirit,

it, ecstatically or by the illumination of reason, to a man, and by man's instrumentality, to a writing.

What did it mean that Jesus "spoke with authority and not as the scribes"? How did the new effusion of the Holy Spirit affect the church as regards authority? How does this apply to modern views of authority? These are some of the questions that confront one as he considers these things.

The figure with which the new era is associated is John the Baptist, represented as the first of a succession of inspired men, who spoke with authority. Whence came John's authority? The effects of his authority is evidenced in several ways. The multitudes that came to hear him is one indication of his influence: their questions indicated their regard for his authority. The multitudes, the publicans, and the soldiers, must have felt that his words demanded more than passive audience as they demanded, "What shall we do?". (Luke 3: 10-14). This and similar comments indicate an atmosphere in which the interest of the multitudes was not due merely to curiosity, but to what they regarded as a prophetic voice—a messenger from God. Herod's reaction to Jesus' reputation is significant. If John had not been an authoritative, and hence influential figure Herod would hardly have imprisoned him for libel, nor would Herodias have demanded his execution. Neither would it have occurred to Herod that John had arisen from the dead. (Matt. 14:2; Mark 6:14; cf. Luke 9:7-9). Such hatreds and fears are not generated by men of no consequence. Even more significant is the reaction of the Jewish leaders to Jesus' question regarding the source of John's authority (Matt. 21: 23-27). Great as was the prestige of the

<sup>1</sup> MacDonald, D. V., *Aspects of Islam*, p. 145,

"chief priests and elders of the people" they dared not deny that John was God's messenger, because of the popular esteem for John. According to data from the New Testament confirmed by Josephus, *Ant.* XVIII, 5 the evidence is strongly for the view that John was regarded as an official spokesman for God.

To what was John's authority attributed? His birth was represented as unique inasmuch as he was "filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb." (Luke 1:14) As with the prophets of old, the "word of God came unto John" before he began to preach; in the absence of evidence to the contrary we are justified in concluding that this coming of the "word" was by the inbreathing of the Holy Spirit as was the case with the prophets. John's word was authoritative and its authority came not by the handling of tradition, nor accurate reasoning, but by the inspiration of the Spirit, which gave perspective and urgency.

With Jesus the situation is more complex. His authority was asserted more emphatically, demonstrated more painstakingly, and challenged more effectively than was John's, according to our sources. One may wonder why the leaders were not afraid to secure Jesus' crucifixion and yet afraid to divest John of his reputation, (Matt. 21:26). Was it due to the time element, or to Jesus superior claims, or some other reason? Jesus' authority was attributed largely to his acts. (Matt. 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-23), to the "signs" which he did. (In John 5 his authority is based on the testimony of John, the testimony of the Father, and the testimony of the Scriptures.) Yet his words themselves must have had an intrinsic authoritative note according to the impression reflected in Matt. 7:9. In accordance with this is the later tradition in John 7:46.

These are the ways in which Jesus' authority was vindicated, but what of its source? J. H. Thayer, in 1897, mentioned ἔφοδος in Matt. 7:29 as a problem awaiting further study.<sup>2</sup> Certainly the context

indicates that it is in contrast to the impression created by the expounders of tradition. It was more than exegesis. The repetition of "It is written; . . . but I say unto you" indicates the self-consciousness, not of a logician, nor that of a scribe, but one who speaks by virtue of a keener insight, a prophet. Sabatier points out that tradition arises when men are no longer sure of themselves or of their inspiration.<sup>3</sup> Jesus must have given the impression that he was treading on new ground with confidence—a confidence that he was under the same influence that originated the Scripture. Bold and revolutionary as these statements (Matt. 5-7) appear they do not annul the authority of Scripture but rather profess to be a reformation, a penetration through the letter of Scripture to the spirit, an effort to get beyond the act to the motive.

Jesus' message seems to have carried its own authentication, being supplemented and confirmed by visible concurrent "signs". Jesus' authority to forgive sins, which could not be demonstrated visually, is given credence by the phenomenon of making a cripple walk, according to Luke 5:24; Mark 2:9,10; Matt. 9:5,6. Jesus' authority is attributed to (1) his inherent relation to the Father—that of sonship (Matt. 21:33-41, (2) to his (acquired) character, obedience and faith (John 8:9; 9:31), and (3) to the Holy Spirit, (by implication), in the light of the Spirit's activity in his conception, baptism, and temptation.

The authority of both John and Jesus is attributed to the Holy Spirit, to insight, to the Inner Light, but associated with previous insights as recorded in Scripture and with concurrent visible evidences of God's approval in "signs" wrought. Cf. Heb. 2:3,4; Mark 1:20.)

To state the viewpoint of the synoptists more precisely: authority comes to an individual from God through the Holy Spirit and as such is in essentially in agreement with previous insights as recorded in Scripture. Such an impartation is impos-

<sup>2</sup> Thayer, J. H., "Language of the New Testament," in *H. D. B.*, III.

<sup>3</sup> Sabatier, Auguste E., *The Religions of Authority and the Religion of The Spirit*, pp. 14, 164.

sible apart from character and conduct and has an almost inevitable (Luke 1:8) effect in one's words and deeds. God is the source of authority and the agent of its communication is the Holy Spirit. It is not a matter of contrast between tradition and insight, for the source of 'tradition' (Scripture) and current insight is the same. The difference is in time.

Paul based his authority on his experience of Christ, a "revelation", on the road to Damascus. (Gal. 1, 2; Acts 22, 26.) Since he was not an apostle by virtue of association with Jesus he was "hard put" to vindicate his authority. Then too, he had more originality. Like Jesus he appealed to his own conduct, the "blessing of God" on his words and work, and the intrinsic value of his insights. Unlike Jesus he could point to his own *changed* attitude, explained by being "apprehended by Jesus Christ" and enslaved willingly. (Phil. 3:13 etc.) His most weighty argument was this circumstantial evidence—the cause for his change lay outside himself. Another influential argument was the results of his preaching as an indication of God's endorsement (Acts 15:3; II Cor. 3:2), also his own manner of life, (II Cor. 12). He did not attribute his authority to the Holy Spirit in addressing others, probably because this, being subjective and not transmissible, would not be convincing. There is evidence, however, that the influence of the Holy Spirit convinced Paul himself of his authority. We get this from his habit of thought in addressing converts—they too had received the Spirit (I Thess. and Gal.)—Paul had not received less. He used reason, especially in Romans, more extensively than any other New Testament writer, except the author of Hebrews, but he valued the gift of the Spirit and the resulting power far more than logic (I Cor. 2:4; 1:20, 27; 13:2, 12) or "words of man's wisdom". We conclude that the "revelation" which he had received was given through the Holy Spirit, that his subsequent devotional life was guided and stimulated by the Spirit (Rom. 8:26), that his credentials as God's spokesman depended upon this, and that this experience of the

Spirit differed from other believers only in degree and in the circumstances attending its initiation (Acts 9). Paul successfully contended for the possibility of an independent impartation of authority by the Spirit apart from tradition (Gal. 1:12ff.) He was thus perhaps the first to insist upon "the validity of non-episcopal ordination".

Among the references in the Pauline letters to the authority which the Holy Spirit imparts to a believer, is the significant one in I Cor. 12:3. "No man speaking in the Spirit of God saith Jesus is anathema: and no one can say, Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Spirit" (cf. John 14:26). On the basis of this statement some significant inferences are justified. Obviously, Paul is both attributing great importance to the Holy Spirit as source of authority and also giving one criterion as to whether one is speaking by inspiration of the Spirit.

Behind this obvious meaning lies a basic assumption. He implies that some did or might claim divine inspiring while anathematizing Jesus, and makes it clear that such a claim would be contrary to the nature of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit has a moral quality that limits His operations. It hints too of the prevailing estimate of the inspiration of the Spirit—an estimate high enough to tempt some to use it to give authority to a condemnation of Jesus. Such a situation is actually disclosed in I Cor. 12:14 and in the Didache (Cf. Acts 20:23; 21:4, 11).

Apparently, it was the generally accepted thing to regard prophetic utterances in the Spirit as uttering the thought of God. That was not debatable. It was only a question of distinguishing the genuine from its imitation.

Taking the view of the New Testament as a whole the relation of the Holy Spirit to authority seems to be this: Reason by itself, as a source of authority, is not discounted except relatively, although the authoritative revelations are reasonable, eventually, if not now (I Cor. 13:12). It supplements insight (I Cor. 14:26ff). The authority of tradition, as represented by

This is what philosophers call mysticism and discovery by intuition. It is recognized as giving assurance to the recipient but is, in itself, incommunicable.<sup>4</sup> Thus Paul and the New Testament in general take care to give the transmittable criteria in the interest of propaganda.

Some problems are yet unsolved. When Rev. George A. Gordon reviewed his 40 year pastorate at Old South Church, Boston, he referred to it as "our exodus from the House of Authority through a wild land to the House of Insight."<sup>5</sup> Dr. Gordon had studied Plato as well as the Pentateuch. To him the Greek philosopher's direct gaze upon absolute truth and beauty was in contrast to the mediated enslaving authority of the letter. Perhaps he was thinking of Plato's comparison of the primary insight of the aristocratic philoso-

<sup>4</sup> Hocking, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience*, pp. 338, 358, 363.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon, Geo. A., "A Pastoral Letter," April 2, 1922, from the *Book of the fortieth Year*, Old South Church, Boston, frontispiece.

the Jewish scriptures, and the verbal apostolic traditions, acquired the force of authority at a very early time as did also the epistles (II Thess. 2:15). These both explained the doctrine and detailed the ethic. Their authority, in turn, rested upon revelation or insight or the inspiration of God through his Spirit. There is little evidence that the eleven claimed authority simply by virtue of their physical association with Jesus (Cf. II Peter 1:16; I John 1:3). Their physical authority lay rather in their endowment with power by the Holy Spirit, their insight into the Scriptures, their sympathetic and intimate association with Jesus (Acts 4:13), and the "signs which followed." It was spiritual, not academic; immediate, not second hand. Spiritual authority may be drawn into single focus—the immediacy of contact with God. This primacy rises above boundaries of time: it discriminates; it is one result of the bestowal of the Holy Spirit.

In the New Testament one may observe the culmination of the Hebrew view of the discovery of truth by immediate perception of reality, i.e., by prophetic revelation.

pher with the "timocratic" rulers, to the discredit of the latter.<sup>6</sup> His forty years' pastorate coincided with the conflict between orthodoxy and liberalism of that day, in which the infallibility of the Scriptures figured largely. Dr. Gordon's ministry was a demonstration that a "liberal" attitude toward Scripture sometimes exists along with a devout spirit. If our conclusion is true that authority begins with first-hand insight into God, or absolute truth, such an antithesis between authority and insight becomes impossible. It can only mean a comparison between one person's insight and another's or between one period of time and another. Is not the only alternative a denial, both of the existence of an absolute truth and an existential or transcendent God, and a reduction of all knowledge to subjectivity and relativity?

Auguste Sabatier's crowning work, *The Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit*, is partly autobiography. Reared in a pious conservative home and trained in rationalistic German schools, his theological thought represents an attempted synthesis of genuine piety and historical criticism. He points out that the second generation after the Reformation lacked the first-hand insight and spiritual power of the reformers and were less liberal in their attitude toward the Bible. He describes the "scholastic period of Protestantism" as resulting in a transfer of authority from the Church to the Book and a loss of the liberty of the Reformation. Much of this is true. But the Protestant principle of basing authority on the Bible as individually interpreted, at best, is not a mere transfer of authority from church to a book; but is rather the insight gained from personal experience of the divine, checked and supplemented by similar insights of others as preserved in writing. It is a balance between the individual and the group; between the present and the past. Liberalism is of two kinds—basically different: one is a liberty gained from genuine insight that places one in spiritual fellowship with previous mystics and gives

<sup>6</sup> Plato, Rep. VIII, 549.

confidence in modifying and supplementing previous insights as embodied in the Scriptures. Such liberals were Jesus, Paul, and the Reformers. Another kind of "liberal" is such because he discredits what seems incompatible with reason or with his own experience—or lack of it.<sup>7</sup> He runs the danger of transferring authority from the group to himself and claiming his insight superior to others, on the negative basis of the unlikelihood of authority, rather than the positive basis of another insight. But the more his "insight" differs from "authority" the more he will be called upon to give evidence why his insight is superior from that of his predecessors. In other words he is not in a position to evaluate and discriminate, unless, like the prophets, Jesus, Paul, and the Reformers, he has an immediate experience of God, or insight into absolute truth, and stands on a common ground with those whose insight he would evaluate. Reason, in the light of the foregoing, is of use to explain insight but not to discount it.

The man with an insight must guard against solipsism and vanity: the man with an objective authority must guard against legality and stagnation. Even the liberal must appeal to some "authority;" if not to a venerable body of tradition, then to himself and his hearers.

In the New Testament we find the balance carefully maintained between the

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<sup>7</sup> His "liberalism" springs not from another mystical experience but arises from a lack of it.

free individual revelations of the Spirit and the insights of the nation as preserved in the Scripture. Anyone claiming the authority of the Spirit of God was careful to give objective criteria and willing himself to be judged by the results. The danger of solipsism was recognized—uncontrolled "revelations" were branded as false. The tendency to go from freedom to antinomianism was often recognized. The New Testament took the middle road between subjective unchanneled experiences and the formalism which had been cast off. In other words the insight of the individual was checked and balanced by reference to the insight of the group—of the past and the present. "The spirit of the prophets are subject to the prophets."

The principle of authority is one of the gravest problems in Protestantism. George A. Gordon and the older modernism had too easy an answer. Neo-orthodoxy is exposed to the same criticism as that directed against the liberals of Gordon's type. It has not sufficiently defined its source of ultimate authority. If it is the authority of reason it is neither in harmony with the New Testament nor the Reformers; if it is the authority of Christian experience and reason it is too subjectivistic. Neo-orthodoxy can scarcely hope to have the faith of the Reformers unless it shares with them the conviction that the canonical Scriptures are the authentic record of prior insights or revelations, attested by the consciences of believers.