

Defending the church's truth claims

12. The Apostolic Tradition: a leap of faith about old manuscripts; Christian confidence

I think that defending the church's truth claims involves being prepared to defend them, not in the in-house code in which church people often discuss these matters among themselves, but, as far as possible, in the terms in which their hearers are used to dealing with large matters affecting our understanding of the universe in which we live, such as the satellites of Saturn, or the mechanics of a tsunami. I think that people outside will want to know what can be known, for example, about the earthly mechanics of divine revelation. They may reasonably want to be clear exactly what it is they are being asked to make a leap of faith about. In this piece I want to look behind the creeds at the particular underlying leap of faith that is involved in you or I accepting them as binding.

The canon. The Roman Catholic church believes that it was by its Apostolic Tradition that the church discerned which writings were to be included in the list of the sacred books, known as the 'canon' of Scripture. According to the Apostolic Tradition of the Roman Catholic church, the Old Testament includes 46 books (or 45 if Jeremiah and Lamentations count as one) and 27 New Testament books. The tally of 46 'Old Testament' books is arrived at by including the books in what is often in England called 'the Apocrypha' from Tobit up to and including 2 Maccabees. On this list the traditions of the Greek and Russian churches agree; but they also count 1 Esdras up to and including 3 Maccabees as 'deuterocanonical scripture'. 2 Esdras is included in the Slavonic bible to this day under the name '3 Esdras'. 4 Maccabees appears as an Appendix to the Greek Bible. In other words, the Greek and Russian orthodox churches have a very slightly different canon of Scripture. As 'the canon' was being formulated about 150 CE, this diversity of tradition is strong confirmation that there was already some diversity of traditions on this matter at least as early as 150 CE. In what follows I am writing about the Roman Catholic canon of Scripture. If, as some scholars think, some of the shorter letters in the New Testament were admitted to the Roman Catholic canon, (which by and large we have inherited), because they fitted tidily in the blank spaces at the end of rolls of manuscript; or, in some cases, because one Christian community insisted on having two of its favourite texts included if another Christian community was to have two of its favourite texts included; so much the more suspect is the resulting canon. Slice it where you like, the selection of the church's canon of Scripture was the result of human decisions in Christian communities, guided, it may well be, by the Spirit.

Authorship and inerrancy. In Roman Catholic thought and belief it is hard to overstate the importance of its canon of Scripture, for the books of the Old and New Testaments included in its canon of Scripture have a very special status - they are the speech of God written down under the breath of the Holy Spirit. The official belief of the Roman Church is that 'sacred scripture' is the speech of God put down in writing. In other words, God is the author of the Bible. God chose those who

wrote the several books and they used their own faculties to the full, but they were constrained by the Spirit; with the result that they as true authors wrote down whatever God wanted written down and no more. Divinely revealed realities are contained and presented in scripture. The books of scripture teach without error that truth which God wanted us taught in order that we might be saved. The emphases are mine, but the beliefs are those of the Roman Catholic church.

The leap of faith. The belief is not that a few selected texts are the speech of God, but that all the entire books contained in the canon of the Old and New Testaments have that unusual character. The church, 'relying on the faith of the apostolic age, accepts as sacred and canonical the books of the Old and the New Testaments, whole and entire with all their parts, on the grounds that, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author, and have been handed on as such to the Church herself.' This passage tells us that God is the author of the books in the canon of the Old and New Testaments and no other books. It tells us that the church relies on its Apostolic Tradition to identify the canon of sacred books. It tells us that the particular leap of faith on which the creeds rest is a leap of faith that a number of old manuscripts contain the Word of God (and for that reason teach us about reality without error). It tells us that that leap of faith was first made in the apostolic age in accordance with the church's Apostolic Tradition. It tells us that the books of Scripture have been handed down to all succeeding generations on that basis. It can readily be seen from our earlier examination of the construction of the creeds that a leap of faith about the status of old manuscripts underpins the faith. It is because God is the author of the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments that those books can not possibly contain any wrong information about underlying reality. If passages in the books appear to contradict one another they must be capable of reconciliation.

The leap of faith about the status of certain old manuscripts gives the creeds their validity. Historical fact, so far as it can be ascertained, is totally irrelevant to a Faith based on divine revelation contained in old manuscripts. If you take the leap of faith, God as author has in effect certified that the building blocks in the Bible conform to the shape of the underlying reality. All that remains to be done is to build out of the pieces supplied by God a construction which satisfies the particular needs of the human intellect which are perceived by and regarded as binding on the constructors - the need for intellectual integrity, coherence and so on. Whatever construction out of blocks of Bible you can agree on by way of a creed, you may be absolutely confident that it corresponds with underlying reality, because only blocks which pass that test have been allowed into the books of the Bible by God. At Nicaea the assembled bishops agreed upon a construction. End of story.

The earthly mechanics of divine revelation. So far our investigation of the earthly mechanics of divine revelation as the Roman Catholic church understands them has revealed, put somewhat unsympathetically, that the creeds depend on a leap of faith about the nature of a number of old manuscripts, which are believed to have been selected from a wider available collection on the basis of a myth rather than on the basis of a tradition properly so called. That is the position which all

churches who separated off from the Roman Catholic church at the Reformation have inherited.

Of which books was God the author? If different canons of scripture can be seen always to have existed, it raises the question, of which books exactly was God the author? It is open to different churches relying on differing traditions to give different answers to this question. The sceptic notes without comment the different conclusions reached by different church communities and the fact that each believes its decision to have been made under the guidance of the Spirit.

Are we sure about the substance of God's Word? We have seen that the Apostolic Tradition of the Roman church, which at first sight seems so secure, monolithic, comforting and impregnable, on closer inspection gives little ground for confidence today. There is a similar problem about the belief in the inerrancy of scripture, which, equally, at first sight seems to be a ground for great confidence. Indeed, so long as the original of, say, the gospel of 'John' is in your hand, the belief may justly give you confidence. But once you are so careless as to lose the original, disquieting problems are at once let loose upon you. Someone may ask, What exactly was written down in the gospel of 'John' under the breath of the Spirit? Those who believe in the inerrancy of scripture often write and speak as though they know the answer to this question. But, on examination, to speak or write in this way without qualification is to suggest a falsehood; for, of course, they do not know what was originally contained in any book of Scripture, any more than anyone else does. All we have are copies of the original manuscript of any book in the Bible and the copies we now have are not by any means all the same. In nearly every case the earliest copy that remains to us was made at least a hundred years (and often much more) after the original text was written down. Small fragments still turn up from time to time; but when the Nestle-Aland Text of the Greek New Testament was reprinted in 1983 we had with regard to the whole New Testament, I believe, one papyrus (P52), which contains a fragment of the gospel of 'John' ('John' 18. 31-33 and 35-38), dating back probably to the second century CE and nothing else earlier than the third century CE.

Inerrancy, the first question. It follows that the first question which has to be answered when seeking to find out what God is revealing to us through inerrant scripture is a question not about God at all, but a technical question about the relative reliability of copy manuscripts. It is a question about transmission. However divine the substance, that substance can be marred in transmission. It is open to anyone to believe additionally that God kept on intervening time after time after time to ensure that we have all the right copy manuscripts we need for our salvation; but as far as I know that is not the official doctrine of any church. As far as I know, no church claims that questions which arise about transmission are questions which God answers directly. Scholars try to answer them as best they can and sometimes agree; but, if they do not all agree, you have to decide for yourself which school you find the more convincing. If we ask, Which of the copies of the gospel of 'John' on which we can now lay our hands approximates most closely to the text of the original manuscript? the Apostolic Tradition of the Roman Catholic church gives no answer, for it is not the sort of question which concerned those

who transmitted the Apostolic Tradition in the past. They thought of themselves as believing in propositions about underlying reality revealed by God, not as holding beliefs about the relative reliability of variant texts. But this question concerns us all right, if we are trying to defend the church's truth claims to people outside who set great store on reason, for the possibility of errancy in transmission introduces uncertainty into the very basis of the apparently rock-like certainty of a belief in the inerrancy of the substantive Word. It is of little practical use to us to know that a vital something was communicated to someone else many years ago, if we do not now know for sure what that something was.

The all-pervading possibility of errors in transmission of texts, and another horrid gap. As Tradition has nothing to say on the matter, the Church feels free to use the work of scholars, if necessary under the counter, to establish the text of the various books. Without making use of the work of scholars, the Church can not tell which is the earliest version of any book of Scripture which we now possess, or what errors can be identified in later versions. Scholars do not even try to establish what errors have occurred in the estimated time gap between the original text and the oldest copy of that text which we now have. They know that can't be done, because they have nothing to work on. As I understand it, what scholars try to do is to establish families of texts, which each start with a head of a family standing uneasily on the edge of a void. That void immediately behind the head of the family stretches back to the time of the writing of the original text and is of greater or lesser extent in time; but as to the continuing sameness, or otherwise, of the wording of the copies of the original text throughout the void nothing can usefully be said. In other words the text of the head of each of the families of texts of, say, 'Acts' itself differs to a wholly indeterminable extent from the text of the original text of 'Acts' of which on its face it appears to be a copy. This does not mean that we know nothing; but it does suggest that we might do well to be more circumspect about our claims to know for sure exactly what God revealed.

Of course, we have a general sense of what the book originally said; but it is well established that scribes make mistakes, sometimes leaving out whole lines at a time and so on, and that persons, or factions, in the church on occasion deliberately 'corrupted' the texts of scripture in important places in order to bolster their particular understanding of the underlying reality. In the circumstances of the copying and preservation of manuscripts as we are now aware of them, we probably have something pretty much like the original gospel of, say, 'John', give or take the odd important earthly corruption; but, given that no one will have bothered to corrupt a text at any stage unless he thought that particular bit of text worth corrupting, a cloud of doubt may reasonably be thought to hang over some of the vital bits. All this tends to establish a rather different picture from the confident certainty about God's inerrant Word which one routinely hears in arguments in church; and we haven't got to interpretation yet, for we need to know what the words are before we can begin to attribute meaning to them. To a sceptical mind, the earthly reality of the matter looks rather messy and unsatisfactory. In 'the mission field' it would be helpful to know for sure exactly what God originally dictated, before setting out to persuade a sceptical someone

else about it; but the possibility of an error in transmission is all-pervading. And there is no escape, for the original is lost.

Are the creeds defensible? Many devout people in churches have a profound emotional relationship with the creeds - commitment, devotion, affection and so on. As to this I say nothing. I am concerned here with the limited question whether the truth propositions contained in them are defensible to 'critical human identities', that is, to a particular type of person, outside the church. In order to make a rational assessment of whether they are defensible we must look to the foundations of the churchly fortress, the Maginot Line. I sum up in this way. The foundations on which the creeds rest, seem to be rather insecure. The building blocks are assumed to be determinate, but no one can be absolutely sure what their shape is. The blocks were originally hewn from a particular quarry identified on the basis of a suspect Apostolic Tradition. The blocks are alleged to deal without error with the subject-matter of underlying reality on the basis of a leap of faith about the status of old manuscripts now long lost. This is a leap of faith which we can hardly expect a modern person, who has taken the trouble to look into the matter, to be prepared to take today.

Christian confidence. I lay some stress on the extent to which confidence in existing understandings of such basic Christian matters as tradition and the inerrancy of scripture is itself illusory for four reasons. First, because I want to suggest that there may be less to lose on this front by abandoning existing church positions than many church people imagine. Secondly, I want to spell out why it is not unreasonable for us to feel a certain uneasiness when repeating the creeds today. Thirdly, I want to do my bit towards trying to turn a faint unease about having to say that we believe things which we do not in fact believe into something more positive, a groundswell of pressure for change. Fourthly, with that in mind, I want to raise questions which you in turn may wish to raise with clerical persons of your acquaintance. You can check with them, for example, that your church does not hold a different understanding from that of the Roman Catholic church on the mechanics of divine revelation. Few things are more certain than that, if we do nothing, nothing will continue to be done, and the opportunity presented by having a far-seeing Archbishop in post in Canterbury will be lost (see Part 16). I want to encourage you to bring home to clerical persons of your acquaintance as occasion arises, indeed, in season and out of season, the difficulty in which they leave us in the field, who are challenged to defend the church's truth claims. Many of them know perfectly well what is the alternative to a belief in an inerrant Word of God, undermined to an indeterminable extent by the possibility of errancy in transmission. The alternative is to approach the scriptures on the footing that God is still at work through the labours of biblical scholars. If the statements which the New Testament contains are diagnosed to be no more than ancient witness statements, the problems of transmission remain, but the very 'Faith' no longer hangs on them. Witnesses always disagree to a greater or lesser extent, and we can thread our way with gratitude and astonishment through what remains to us - though certainty we shall not have. I shall be arguing that these are two radically different ways of looking, not only at individual texts in the bible, but at the picture presented by the Bible as a whole on questions of doctrine (and,

indeed, of ethical authority). I shall be arguing that they are true alternatives. I shall be arguing that as a matter of common sense the two alternatives are mutually exclusive (see Part 16). This is unlikely to go down well with clerical persons. I shall consider in Parts 14 and 15 whether we in the field can fairly be asked to try to defend any longer a churchly attempt to have matters of such importance both ways, convenient (and indeed face-saving) though it may in the last century have appeared to be to approach individual texts on the one basis while approaching the Bible as a whole on matters of doctrine on the other.

Footnote on John Calvin. John Calvin appears to have inherited the Roman Catholic position on the inerrancy of scripture and does not appear to dissent from it; he refers somewhere to the authors of the books of the Bible as 'God's secretaries'.

It may be helpful to bear in mind at this point that different generations face different problems related to faith; it makes it easier both to see why solutions to old problems do not always look satisfactory today and to anticipate that a new problem may require a radically different solution.

In Part 13, then, three different faith problems; three different solutions.