

# AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE & AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH IN A POSTMODERN CLIMATE

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## I. Postmodernism and the modern critique of authority

*Some ambiguities of postmodernism as a characteristic of our time*

There are some pitfalls involved in the characterization of our contemporary world as postmodern. First of all, it is not always clear what is meant by 'postmodern'. It is well known that the term has switched meanings since its introduction. But even if we take it in the sense which has become popular through the book of Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne - rapport sur le savoir* (1979), we are still facing several ambiguities.

Lyotard proclaimed the end of the great narratives, having in mind especially the ideals of freedom that came forth from Enlightenment thinking. Since then Francis Fukuyama's book *The end of history and the last man* (1992) appeared, which actually is a strong defense of one strain of the great Enlightenment narrative: liberal democracy as the ultimate realization of freedom. So modernity still claims validity defying the negative critique of postmodern thought.

But the main ambiguity resides in the term 'post-modernism' itself. As such it suggests a critique of modernity. And it is clear from the writings of Lyotard, and other postmodern philosophers, that they reject the way in which the Enlightenment ideals have been pursued, both in liberal democracy, with its inclusion of capitalism, and in communism, with its inherent totalitarianism. As a consequence the ideals themselves have become suspect. The expectations that were tied to the rational critique of traditional religion and philosophy, at one side, and the societal institutions of church and state at the other are no longer shared. Even science has become suspect because its ideal of rational control changed the natural environment into a wasteland and human society into a technically controlled bureaucracy.

Yet, what lies at the root of the Enlightenment narrative, the idea of freedom and critical thinking as its main instrument if not its core, remains at least part of what characterizes postmodern thinking itself. Kant's idea of the autonomous rational subject may be severely criticized with the help of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, to show how factors apart from reason unavoidably determine human existence, and Darwin could be added to relate the human person to animal life, but this critique cannot be understood apart from the horizon of freedom as implied in the Enlightenment narrative itself. Even if beyond reach the ideal of freedom has not lost its normative appeal. In a sense, postmodern thought is modern thought in a more radical form. Therefore some problems of modernity show themselves with greater force in postmodernity. An analysis of the understanding of authority in our present situation will serve as an illustration of this.

### *Traditional authority*

In traditional societies authority is usually understood in terms of having a transcendent origin. This applies to authority both in the political field and in the area of religious and moral education, or, in the wider sense, of knowledge in general. In fact, for a long time the two areas were not even clearly differentiated. Religion and knowledge about the universe, together with politics and practical wisdom formed an integrated whole which was understood

as founded in a divine order. The nature of this integration and the understanding of transcendence have been different at different times and places, but the ultimate legitimation of authority in matters of knowledge and wisdom or social position was never seen in the human person himself. Religion pervaded society and served as the foundation for any authority playing out its role.

I made the distinction between the field of politics and the field of knowledge, because the concept of authority was applied in these two areas in a different way. In Greek philosophy *e.g.* authority concerning knowledge was claimed for people that one could quote in matters where a proof in the strict sense was not possible.<sup>1</sup> Authority in this sense is based on experience, wisdom, or old age. But even so, it is not only a human affair, just a distinctive characteristic of special people which they have gained by themselves. In general, gifts, as the word says, are seen as given and should be respected for that reason. Special gifts are part of a given order and have a transcendent origin. That is the ultimate legitimation of the authority which can be claimed for them. It is this kind of authority that has become characteristic of tradition. Tradition is based on knowledge and wisdom from the past. Therefore it belongs to a god-given order and thus its authority ultimately is of a religious nature.

Authority as the right to act or command, *e.g.* in politics, is of a different nature. It is based on an institutional position. This kind of authority is even more related to a transcendent order. The emperor or the king represents divine power. His right to command might even link him to the gods as in the great empires of the past. But also in the quite different context of theocratic Israel, where especially the true prophets claimed an independent voice of God over against the king, it was never questioned that the position of authority was part of a God-given order. As in other situations, kings might be opposed and in some cases replaced, but authority as such could claim obedience because it was given by God (*cf.* Romans 13).

### *The Enlightenment position*

A radical change in the understanding of authority is defended by the Enlightenment. In the area of knowledge the authority of tradition is rejected. Its appeal to the authorities of the past is accused of prejudice based on partiality. All claims of knowledge have to justify themselves before the court of reason. This applies even to the church as the institution that proclaims the truth of religion. Something similar occurs in the field of politics. The authority of the state can only be maintained if it stands the test of rational scrutiny.

Put in this way the difference might not appear so great. The need to give a rational account of authority was felt in Greek society, at least since the birth of philosophy. And it was included into the Christian tradition as soon as Christians felt the urge to defend their faith intellectually in the face of contemporary thought. The real change lies in the fact that Enlightenment thinking basically rejects the appeal to a transcendent order. All authority should be justified in terms of the free and rational subject that man is supposed to be. True knowledge can only find its foundation in autonomous reason as Descartes and Kant tried to show. Authority in the state is constructed on the basis of the autonomous freedom of the individual. Thomas Hobbes figures in this respect as the first of a long line of social philosophers. The understanding of authority in the Enlightenment is basically new because human subjectivity has taken the place of the transcendent order.

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*Hist. Wörterbuch der Philosophie.* Herausgegeben von Joachim Ritter, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1971, Band I, 724ff. s.v. Autorität.

It is certainly true that this new approach to authority has brought along positive results. Modern democracy has not only roots in the Enlightenment critique of the absolute power of the king. In fact, the idea of absolute power, which the Enlightenment opposed, was itself the result of a rejection of the transcendent order which, at least within the biblical tradition, puts restraints upon all human authority. The idea of a state with absolute power which is sometimes defended in modern times does not find support in the Christian tradition. For Christianity human power is always subject to the law of God. Nevertheless, modern democracy as we now appreciate it with its rights and freedoms is, at least for some part, the result of Enlightenment ideas.

The same holds in the area of science. The claim that the achievements of modern science are the fruit of critical thinking as defended by the Enlightenment, easily ignores the importance of the Christian doctrine of creation as a motive for empirical research. All the same, the openness of modern science to abandon traditional ideas in its search for scientific truth cannot be understood apart from the critical attitude of the Enlightenment towards tradition.

### *The Enlightenment problem*

But what concerns us here are the problems which came forth from the attempt to find a foundation for all kinds of authority in human subjectivity. In the sphere of politics there always has been a problem. The Enlightenment construed the authority of a government as an instrument to protect and improve the interests of the individual. The question then arises how the individual will feel obliged to respect the government in the execution and implementation of its authority when he feels that it goes against his personal interests. Of course, a government might have the right to punish its citizens if they neglect the law. But this does not solve the problem. Under those circumstances you just try to be disobedient without being noticed.

The idea of a social contract by which individuals bestow authority on a government which they then will obey, postulates the loyalty of the partners in the contract to one another. Otherwise they might always try to avoid keeping the law without being caught. Therefore, by definition, loyalty exceeds the limits of individual interest. The idea of a social contract presupposes a norm that cannot be deduced from the interest of the individual as such. And so the individual and its interests fail to give an ultimate foundation for the acceptance of authority.

The same problem arises in relation to the laws of a state. What is the basis for their authority? Why should they be obeyed? The answer could be: because they are enacted and implemented in a legal way. But then the next question arises: are laws to be judged only according to formal or also to intrinsic criteria? Is there any guarantee that laws founded in the will of a majority or even of all the people of some country for that reason are also just laws? Is what people want necessarily good? And if not, where do we find the criteria to judge the intrinsic quality of the laws?

Concerning the relation between the will of God and what is good the Middle Ages raised the question: are things good because God wills them or does God will them because they are good? In the first case, what is good seems to be an arbitrary result of God's will which is supposed to be totally free. In the second case God seems to be bound by laws that are above Him. The dilemma can be solved if we believe that God by nature is good and just. The problem returns, though, if what is good must result from the will of people. Here there is no solution, because it would be against what we know about people to believe that they are

intrinsically good and just.

As to the foundation of knowledge it took more time before the intrinsic problem of the Enlightenment approach came fully into the open. In a sense it is clear already in Descartes. He does find an absolute foundation for knowledge in the certainty of the *ego cogito*. At the same time he needs God as a guarantee not only for the truth of knowledge about the external world but also for the reliability of reasoning as such, because the human subject is finite and cannot construe reality out of himself. The most he can try is to reconstruct it on the basis of his trust that the order of the universe is identical with the results of human reason. Kant, of course, characterized this trust as dogmatic and limited theoretical reason to reality as it is subjectively experienced. But it is only in the second half of our century that it became gradually clear that the whole project of Cartesian foundationalism is bound to fail. Neopositivism already excluded religion and ethics from the domain of objective knowledge. Today with the collapse of neopositivism in philosophy even the objectivity of the natural sciences is seriously questioned.

#### *Continuation of the problem in postmodernism*

Postmodern thought does not solve the problem of the foundation of authority but intensifies it. That applies both to the area of knowledge and of politics. The reason is that the postmodern critique of the idea of an autonomous rational subject does not renounce the Enlightenment critique of transcendent order but presupposes it. When even the hope of a rational foundation of authority is abandoned, and by the same token a public account based on universal criteria has lost its meaning, only the possibility of a radical subjectivism, sometimes disguised as pragmatism, seems to be left.

Richard Rorty is a clear illustration of this position. In the area of knowledge he rejects any claim that statements relate to reality as it is given. Truth, according to one of his famous statements, is a matter of convincing one's peers, not of actual facts. To understand Rorty's position it is important to see that it is not a defense of common sense in the traditional way. Rorty's idea of irony presupposes the metaphysical destruction of common sense's natural trust in its own reliability. Therefore, it not only dissolves the foundation metaphysics claimed to provide for true knowledge over against the subjective beliefs of opinion, but also radicalizes the metaphysical distrust of the objective validity of common sense knowledge about the world. In his critique of the Enlightenment, Rorty does not go back to a transcendent order as a guarantee for the possibility of finite and responsible knowledge by human creatures but he replaces the autonomous rational subject by a kind of freedom that actually is nothing but the outcome of a process of time and chance.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to politics, Rorty is rather content with liberal democracy as it functions in his own American situation. But he explicitly gives up any hope of providing any philosophical foundation for it. In fact, he cannot escape the conclusion that the idea of solidarity that he defends is itself just a typical western idea that resulted from contingent conditions and cannot claim for its propagation any universal validity.<sup>3</sup>

Not all postmodern philosophers hold to the same position as Rorty. But it seems to me that the relationship of knowledge to reality is not just a problem for Rorty but for all or

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. H.G. Geertsema, *Contingentie als uitgangspunt. Het denken van Richard Rorty*, in: *Philosophia Reformata* 56 (1991), 35-61; also H.G. Geertsema, *Richard Rorty: grenzen aan het pluralisme?* In: Theo de Boer en Sander Griffioen (red.), *Pluralisme. Cultuurfilosofische beschouwingen*, Boom, Amsterdam en Meppel, 1995, p. 83-103.

<sup>3</sup> See R. Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge University Press 1989, esp. the Introduction.

most of them. They have not solved the problem of knowledge as it came forth out of the Enlightenment. Neither have they given an answer to the question how to legitimate political authority.

As to this second side of our theme, the legitimacy of political authority is widely discussed. In fact it is not only a theoretical problem. The problem that I sketched before as a theoretical one, is now raised by the actual practice of daily life. The Enlightenment rejection of the transcendent foundation of authority has become part of the way people think and act in the street. The sense of community as more than an instrument for the individual to achieve his goals is getting lost. Some philosophers, therefore, rehabilitate the meaning of tradition, because only in this way the values of community that transcend the interests of the individual can be rescued. At the same time, hardly anybody wants to lose the benefits of modern society that have resulted from the new developments in which Enlightenment ideas have played such an important role.

The problem, then, is how to unite the achievements of modernity and its new opportunities for the individual with the values of community that are understood as part of traditional societies and are broken down by the very same processes of modernization. How can we redeem a sense of normativity that transcends the interests of the individual as they are understood in the Enlightenment without losing what we value as the fruits of the Enlightenment? Often a tension appears unavoidable: we are caught between, at one side, what is needed to keep modern society going with all the achievements we value, and, at the other side, what seems to be necessary to redeem it from its deficiencies. We do not want to go back behind the Enlightenment even if it were possible, but at the same time this seems what we need to do to overcome its problems. Be that as it may, postmodern thought does not seem to contribute much to the solution of these problems because, by its very nature, it rather intensifies them.

#### *A provisional conclusion*

At this point I want to draw the following provisional conclusion: a discussion with postmodernism cannot be undertaken just in terms of trust as a necessary counterpart to suspicion. There is good reason for suspicion of domination and mastery in relation to people in power and the way they have made an appeal to authority and normativity as based upon a transcendent foundation. Often this appeal merely functioned as a disguise for an unrestrained use of power in social relations of whatever kind. Or it was used to defend a traditional structure of authority without considering the possibility that change might be necessary.

Basically, though, the suspicion of authority is not typical for postmodernism. It is part of modernism itself. But the problem is not only about how to detect the still remaining structures of domination and mastery but also, and maybe even moreso, about how to redeem authority in its necessary function for society.

There is also much reason to criticize the Enlightenment claim of undubitable knowledge as based upon autonomous human reason. The negative results of its aim to control the natural and the social world should be sufficient warning not to take scientific knowledge as absolute. At the same time, we should realize that postmodernism's perspective of knowledge is not more promising. Its critique of objective knowledge can easily lead to a radical subjectivism which does not even feel the need anymore to give a public account of its own position.

In both cases what is at stake are the foundations of our being human in a responsible way. The challenge we face as Christians in the present situation is not sufficiently indicated by 'trust and suspicion' in the face of domination and mastery. There is a more basic issue. How do we understand our being finite? How do we understand normativity and authority? Is there a given transcendent order to which we respond, whether we like it or not, or are we left to ourselves without any given direction within a silent universe?

If as Christians we believe a transcendent order to be given because as responsible creatures from the beginning we now live as called to new life in Jesus Christ, there is a second challenge. How can we live this new life both in the face of modernity and of postmodernity? Applied to the two areas of authority that I have discussed: is it possible to respect the different kinds of authority within society for their intrinsic meaning because they are founded in a transcendent order, while at the same time doing justice to the achievements of modernity? And secondly, is it possible to integrate the postmodern critique of the totalitarian claim of rationality with a view of knowledge that does not lead to relativism or pragmatism?

I will not try to answer these questions. In the next part of this paper I limit myself to the problem of authority again. After some general remarks, I shall concentrate the discussion on the problem of the authority of Scripture and of authority in the church. The authority of Scripture pertains to the field of knowledge. The church in its organisational form belongs to those societal structures in which authority necessarily has a place. In both cases the Enlightenment critique has made a deep impact. The authority of Scripture has been threatened by the application of the method of higher criticism to the Bible. The emphasis on the freedom of the individual has seriously challenged the authority of the church to make pronouncements about what the individual should believe. So the discussion will cover both areas that I have mentioned, but it will necessarily be limited in its scope. In order to discuss these issues I first want to review some of the ideas of the Enlightenment on the basis of the teaching of the New Testament.

### **Intermezzo: Freedom and Coming of Age in the Enlightenment and in the New Testament**

In his famous essay 'Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?'<sup>4</sup> Kant defines the Enlightenment as man's emergence from his self-imposed tutelage. For him this is, in the first place, a matter of knowledge and only secondarily the possibility of acting according to this knowledge. Because the original destiny of man lies in the progress of knowledge, progress can only be made by critical argument over against the authority of tradition. Freedom of critical thought is, therefore, the condition for man to proceed to adulthood. And it is against man's inner nature to restrict himself in the free use of his reason. Kant applies this especially to matters of religion but he has also the discussion of politics and law in mind.

Freedom of independent judgment in all areas of life over against an uncritical acceptance of what the authorities proclaim, especially in the church and in the state, characterized the ideal of the Enlightenment. Kant did not think that in his time this ideal had been already accomplished. His time was an age of enlightenment and not yet of being

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<sup>4</sup> See *Immanuel Kant. Werke in sechs Bänden*. Herausgegeben von Wilhelm Weischedel, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1966. Band VI, 51-61.

enlightened. If measured according to the freedom people claim to have when they criticize all kinds of authority and pronounce their own opinions, it might seem that in our time the ideal of the Enlightenment has been realized. At the same time, it has become clear that the views people defend as their own are not necessarily based on the use of critical thinking. Nevertheless it has become an "acquirement" of our culture that people do not accept authority as a matter of course; this is especially so in the state and is also evident in the church. They want to have their own say about what they should believe and what they should do. In that sense they have, indeed, come of age.

For Christians it is important to realize that the ideas of freedom and coming of age are not inventions of the Enlightenment. They already play a crucial role in the New Testament, as appears from the teaching of the apostle Paul, *e.g.* in his letter to the Galatians. When Paul speaks about freedom, he not only thinks of the Christian faith that makes us free from the need for ourselves to fulfill the law of God because Christ did it in our place. Freedom for him is also related to adulthood, maturity, no longer being a child that has to follow all kinds of rules imposed by those who are the educators. Freedom as maturity is the goal to which all the gifts in the congregation of Christ are directed (Ephesians 4: 11-16). In Christ, the believer is free and the church is able to make responsible judgment.

Being a child we are asked to be obedient. If we behave obediently we are not responsible for the consequences of what we do. This responsibility is on those who told us what to do. Being adult means we are responsible ourselves. We are supposed to have learnt what is good, and how we should act. We have to apply what we learnt under new conditions. Maturity is the adult form of responsibility. We have to assess the situation in which we have to act for ourselves. We have to critically judge the way others behaved before us. Paul applies this adult form of responsibility to the position the believers have in Christ whom they confess as their Lord and Saviour.

It might be clear that the philosophers of the Enlightenment did not understand freedom and maturity as freedom and maturity in Christ. Critical thought for them was at the heart of freedom, not the unity with Christ. Yet we might ask whether the critical attitude, in relation to tradition and authority as it was proclaimed by the Enlightenment on the basis of rational assessment, should not be redeemed and be understood as part of the freedom that we have through faith in Christ. He is the Son of Man that has come in our place. I suggest that the freedom we have in Christ implies that we should judge and act in the world as adults, studying nature and society, and assessing what we find according to the standards that we have learnt, even if this means that we have to reject what people before us thought. In this way we should be able to relate positively to the critical attitude towards tradition and all kinds of human authority as an "acquirement" of our time, not by rejecting tradition and authority as such but by being open to a critical assessment of them.

At the same time, we should be deeply aware of the radical difference between the Enlightenment idea of freedom and maturity and the freedom and maturity in Christ which the New Testament speaks about. In the Enlightenment, freedom and maturity may not always be understood apart from our dependence upon God, but they certainly are cut loose completely from the cross and resurrection of Christ. Freedom in Christ means complete surrender to God, to look for His will and purpose, to acknowledge our total dependence upon Him, to confess that we are lost and alienated, and unable by ourselves to overcome the power of evil, and live our life as it is meant by God; it means faith in the death and resurrection of Christ, as the basis of our freedom.

Critical thought, as part of this freedom, can only function on the basis of a strong awareness of the power of evil, even in our own thoughts, and, therefore, of a deep sense of dependence on the Word of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Critical thought by itself has no redeeming power. On the contrary, taken by itself, apart from the knowledge of God's commandments as the guide to life and without unity with Christ as Redeemer, it easily leads to total anarchy and desorientation. Again, we are called to look away from ourselves to what transcends us, not only in relation to the normativity that should direct us but also for the redemption from evil which so deeply affects our lives.

## **II Recovery of Authority**

### *General observations*

First I like to make some general observations.

1) Authority, both in relation to knowledge and wisdom and in relation to social institutions, is a matter of persons. Even in cases where a social body has the right or the power to act or command, this right is always exercised by some people. In this sense authority is a personal affair.

Often, we will find, that a distinction is not made between authority in matters of knowledge or wisdom and the right to command within a social institution. In the past authority was seen as given by God, or the gods, and respected for that reason. Authority had a personal origin. A transcendent power bestowed human beings with the authority they exercised both in terms of knowledge or wisdom and in terms of power to act or command. In modern times people have authority because they have shown special qualities. Therefore they deserve to be listened to because of their social position or because of their demonstrated expertise in an area of knowledge. Authority as the right to influence other people is now founded on the consent of those that are being influenced.

In both cases authority is understood as a personal matter. Originally it belongs to God or the gods or to the autonomous individual. If people exercise authority over other people, this power might be granted by a higher authority, either divine or human, or it might be acquired by means of special qualities, but always authority is understood as, in essence, a personal prerogative. As indicated, this understanding of authority in personal terms seems to apply both in the area of knowledge and to the exercise of power within social structures.

It should be noticed, though, that in this way a typical feature of authority as it functions within social institutions is lost to sight. Authority as part of an organized social institution cannot be understood only in personal terms. It has an institutional side as well. This can easily be understood, if we look at the organization of a new association. When people come together, *e.g.*, to start a new sportsclub, they have to choose a board, someone that is responsible for the finances, and other officials. Specific responsibilities are assigned to specific people. And these responsibilities include a power to act or command, in other words, authority.

In a similar way social institutions like a state, a business firm, a church, a university etc. imply the element of authority because of their structural organization. Specific competences to act or command have to be assigned to specific people. The content of the authority does not depend on personal qualities but on the institutional structure. Of course,

people should qualify for the position they are assigned to, but the basis of their authority is not their qualifications but the official appointment. Authority in this sense, then, should not be understood primarily as the power of one person to influence others on the basis of their consent or by divine installation but as a competence and responsibility to fulfil a certain task. The task was there before the person came to fulfill it.

2) Authority which is exercised by people, whoever they are, is never absolute. This is immediately clear in the area of knowledge and wisdom. However wise or knowledgeable somebody might be, a statement is never true or even wise just because of the speaker who made it. We might expect it to be true or wise because it comes from an authority in the field, but the criteria according to which its truth or wisdom should be judged hold independent of the speaker. They are the same for everybody.

The same holds in relation to authority within a social institution. If authority in this case should not be understood in terms of the power of one person to influence another, whether or not by his consent, but as a competence and responsibility to fulfill certain tasks within an organized body, then it is clear that here too criteria apply irrespective of the person in authority. The exercise of authority can always be judged. The position of authority is meant to serve the social institution within which it is exercised. It is abused if it is directed to the benefit of the person who holds it. The institutional element of authority provides the norms according to which the exercise of authority can be judged.

So the exercise of authority is open to assessment. Because the truth of a statement, the wisdom of advice and the virtue of a command, rest upon criteria that are given independently of the people in authority, there always has been the possibility for others to evaluate and judge. In this respect, though, the Enlightenment, that we discussed before, has had a deep impact.

In former times people in a subordinate position often were supposed not to criticize those who were placed above them. They had to show respect and critical comments were deemed an inappropriate part of that. Critical judgment was the prerogative of those of an equal or even higher position. Therefore, sometimes the highest in authority was supposed to be beyond all criticism because he was seen as the direct representative of the gods. It is especially the prophets in Old Testament Israel who have made clear that no human authority is exempted from possible critique, for it is always subject to the revealed law of God.

In the Enlightenment, the exercise of authority in every field and of every stature has been subjected to public discussion. Not only prophets or priests with a special calling but the people as such had the right to express critique. Aristocracy turned into democracy. As long as it is understood that in neither case the criteria of judgment are decided upon by the people but that they should be sought for, received, and impartially applied, there is nothing wrong with the wide distribution of public responsibility. At the contrary, it is part of human dignity that each individual, wherever she is able, is allowed to bear responsibility.

In this connection the distinction I made before between authority in the area of knowledge and authority as exercised within a social institution proves to be important. In the case of knowledge it is clear that a proposition that does not satisfy the independent criteria that need to be applied for its assessment should not be accepted as true, whatever the position of the person that makes the statement. If I am convinced, for strong reasons, that a statement cannot be true, I will not believe it whatever authority in the field might support it. But in case of institutional authority the matter is not that simple. I might be convinced on the basis of valid reasons that a task that I am assigned to will not be for the benefit of the institution for

which I am working, yet if the assignment is given by somebody who is authorized to do so, I am obliged to fulfill it unless it would be against my conscience.

The disagreement with a person in authority as such is not sufficient for the decision not to obey him. To be obedient should never be blind. There is always an element of responsibility at the side of him who observes obedience, but this cannot mean that the subordinate can take over the responsibility of the authorized person. In this case the institutional element of authority, as a responsibility that is assigned to somebody, has to be respected even if the person involved does not show the necessary capability. Authority of the institutional kind is dependent on legal procedures. It does not end with private dissent. For this reason Kant in his essay about the Enlightenment made the distinction between the freedom of public discussion and the obligation of private obedience. Without this distinction, the right to criticize authorities might result in total social anarchy.

3) Until now I have concentrated the discussion on human authority. God's authority needs to be distinguished from the authority exercised by people because of its unique character. But according to the teaching of Scripture we are already confronted with the authority of God in the authority of people. In connection with authority within social institutions three elements can be mentioned.

a) The fact that authority is structurally given. It is not just an invention of humankind nor a result of contingent historical conditions, it is given by God as part of the created order.

b) The norms that hold for the right exercise of authority are also given by God. Social institutions, even when they have come about within a historical development, belong to His creation and therefore should be unfolded according to their creational purpose.

c) The people who legitimately occupy a position of authority should be seen as being placed there by God. There is nothing wrong with democratic procedures and the implication that government officials will be dismissed when they lose at the election. God always uses creational means to achieve His purposes. The important point is that authority is understood as ultimately coming from God and not from supposedly autonomous humankind.

Because of these three points, a government never just represents the will of the nation. It always should realize that its responsibility is to represent God and act according to His will. For that they should be respected and evaluated. Even when responsibility before God is denied in a secular culture, the government still has to be judged according to constitutional and other laws that are implemented because they are supposed to be right not just because the people want it so.

The three points also make clear what is unique about the authority of God. In relation to human authority it is essential to understand that it is never absolute. There are always independently given norms according to which it can be judged. But in relation to God, there are no other standards than those given by God himself. In this sense God's authority is absolute. That is a structural implication of the relationship of Creator and creature. There is no one other than God to whom we can appeal before God. At the same time we should realize that God does not want the blind obedience of a slave, but that of a child in freedom and love. Because of his character his commandments are directives to life.

### *The authority of Scripture*

Almost from the beginning of Christianity there has been a discussion about the question how

Scripture should be interpreted. One way was to stick as much as possible to a literal reading. Others felt the freedom to apply a threefold interpretation: historical, moral and spiritual. But whatever view was defended, the authority of Scripture as the word of God was not at stake. This situation has changed with the Enlightenment.

The claim of the Enlightenment that all kinds of authority had to defend themselves before the court of reason, could not but be understood as an attack on the unconditional authority of the Bible as the word of God. To resist this claim by all means for the sake of the continuity of the Christian faith was fully justified. But this still leaves us with the question: is it warranted to reject the results of critical historical and literary analysis as it was part of the Enlightenment approach to the Bible, because they depart from the traditional understanding and its presuppositions? Is it possible in the face of these results to maintain the idea of infallibility or inerrancy in relation to everything the Bible says? Is this assumption a necessary part of the confession that the Bible is the word of God? And, if not, what are the consequences for our understanding of its authority?

In general it is accepted now that the Bible should be read in relation to the historical situation in which it was written. God's revelation is adapted to the conditions of those that received it. The idea of a history of revelation will not meet much resistance today. But can this idea sufficiently account for the differences between the picture of the universe that we have today and the way the Bible describes it? What about the creation and the flood? Should the methods of critical analysis that we deem necessary for historical research be immediately put to one side once the Bible as a source of historical information is at stake? If we are sceptical about these methods in relation to the Bible should this not have consequences for our appreciation of them in general? Or does the nature of the Bible as the word of God require that we exempt it from the means that we normally use to understand the meaning of a historical text? But then, how far do we go in applying special methods of understanding to the Bible?

For me it has become gradually clear that we cannot reject *a priori* all results of the methods of so called higher criticism when applied to the Bible. With all the reservations we should maintain because of its unwarranted presuppositions some of its conclusions are fairly based on authentic research. At the same time I want to stick to the confession that the Bible is the word of God. The question, then, is: how do we understand the authority of the Scripture if it is at the same time the unfailing word of God and the fallible word of man? In what follows, I try to sketch an approach that both respects the Bible as the word of God and at the same time leaves freedom to analyze it with the ordinary means of historical and literary research.

I start with looking at the way the Bible presents itself. As I have pointed out elsewhere<sup>5</sup> the nature of the Bible as God's word is determined by the triadic structure of Speaker - sent messenger - addressee. God speaks to his people through human messengers. 'Moses and the prophets' is in the New Testament a designation of the Old Testament. The New Testament itself contains the message of God through Jesus Christ and his apostles. The Bible presents itself as the document of God's words spoken through Moses and the prophets, through Jesus and the apostles.

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<sup>5</sup> See 'Faith and Science in Biblical Perspective: Human Responsibility before God' in: Jitse M. van der Meer editor, *Facets of Faith & Science. Volume 4: Interpreting God's Action in the World*. Lanham: The Pascal Centre for Advanced Studies in Faith and Science / University Press of America 1996, p. 285-312.

It is important to understand that in God's use of people they are not just go-betweens with a sealed dispatch. Sometimes more, and sometimes less, but always to some extent, they are personally involved in the bringing of their message. A strong example of this is the prophet Jeremiah. The book that carries his name attests to his sensitive and vulnerable personality. Yet, he was called to bring a message primarily of judgment. For anyone in his situation this would have been hard, but even more so for him because of the person he was. He suffers with his people and he suffers for the sake of his God. I am convinced that by his personal involvement in the message he had to preach he witnessed to the precarious involvement of God himself who sent him. The prophet Hosea with his painful marriage is another example of a messenger whose life plays a part in the message, his marriage with a prostitute being a reference to Israel's unfaithfulness to God.

The personal involvement of the prophets shows how God uses people when they have to communicate his message. They are not like tape-recorders but they have to commit themselves with their whole person. In quite a different way the same applies to Luke when he writes his gospel of Jesus Christ. He tells us that he only wrote his own orderly account of what had happened, after he had carefully investigated everything from the beginning. When we read the historical books in the Old Testament we get the same impression. The author is using his own abilities to collect the material for his book before he writes it down as history. Never a book gives the impression to be dictated by God himself.

Leaving aside questions that can be asked as to the great variety in the writings of the Old and New Testament, I want to mention two more points of a general nature that are important in relation to the triadic structure of Speaker - sent messenger - addressee in the Bible.

In the first place, the involvement of the person of the messenger in the communication of the message of God has a positive side. This is clear from the example of Jeremiah and Hosea. The existential involvement of the messenger adds great intensity to the message concerned. But it also carries along with it some limitations. The Spirit of God certainly can enlarge the scope of human knowledge and confer insights that otherwise would not be possible. At the same time, the horizon of knowledge of a certain period, maybe even of some person, with its specific limitations, will not be eliminated. This not only applies to the knowledge of nature and the universe, or of history, but also to the area of ethics and law as the examples of slavery, polygamy, and the rules of criminal and war-law demonstrate. It means that we have to read the Scriptures with discernment.

In the second place the triadic structure of Speaker - sent messenger - addressee should remind us of the purpose of the Bible. God does not speak to humankind just to give some information about the world or ourselves, let alone to satisfy all kinds of curiosity. The urge for knowledge and understanding, as such, might be a proper reason for doing science and philosophy, but the Bible is given to us to direct our lives according to our original destination, which lies in a relationship of love, trust, obedience, and worship of God. Therefore Christ summarizes 'all the Law and the Prophets' in the great commandment of love. For this reason God's word is spoken in the midst of the situation in which people live and exist.

In the person of the messenger, with its human possibilities and limitations, the word of God becomes part of the concrete historical situation and thus shows what it means to serve him in the conditions of the day. The word of God maintains its significance through the ages, but in a different time the relevant differences should be taken into account. Otherwise the

word of God will not be understood for its real meaning. God should be served according to the creational and historical conditions of each time, not by repeating a traditional doctrine that has lost all connection with real life, but in a relationship that is lived within the concrete temporal horizon of the situation and that is renewed from within by the power of the redeeming word of God.

The triadic nature of the Bible can also help us to understand its authority. Because God speaks through human messengers with the inclusion of their own abilities, we encounter in the Bible both divine and human authority. As pointed out before, God's authority is absolute in the sense that there are no standards independent of God himself to which we can appeal over against God. It is this authority that confronts us in the Bible. The special nature of the Bible as the word of God puts us as creatures before our Creator who calls us back to himself to respond to the gift of his love in Jesus Christ. Here only faith and loving obedience in total surrender are appropriate. It does not befit us as creatures to judge the divine authority with which the call to life in his merciful word is spoken to us.

This divine word comes to us through people who are filled and directed in what they say by the Spirit of God but who still speaks within the horizon of their human possibilities. The Spirit of God can give insights and visions that transcend the horizon of person and time. In general, though, He uses ordinary human possibilities and directs them to God, so they become means to communicate his message. Therefore, the means of the message - language, style, geographical, geological and historical knowledge of the messengers, and even their ethical and religious insights - bear the stamp of the limitations of their person, time and culture. Here we are confronted with human authority. Like all human authority it is not absolute but open to enquiry and judgment by norms which are themselves given by God and are to be discovered by careful study and reflection.

It is crucial to understand that speaking of human authority does not mean that we might easily ignore it. The distinction between divine and human authority in relation to the Bible does not mean that only what bears the stamp of divine authority is important.

As I pointed out before concerning institutional authority, all authority is given by God. It should be respected, even if it can be judged and, therefore, is never absolute. This call for respect applies especially to the human authority of the Bible writers. They do not have authority in the institutional sense. The distinction between disagreement on valid reasons and yet being obedient does not apply. As in the case of knowledge truth is at stake and we cannot accept something as true if we have convincing arguments against it.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the human authors of the Bible deserve a special respect, because they are to be seen as messengers sent by God. That puts them in a special position. It does not make their authority absolute. It may be judged according to the standards of knowledge given by God himself as we have discovered them in our own time. Yet, they should always be listened to carefully, because God speaks through them. A disrespect of the Bible, as to its human side, would imply a disrespect of God himself in the same way as disregard in respect to a messenger would show disregard in respect to the one who has sent him.

In fact, however important the distinction between divine and human authority might be to help us understand the way God is speaking to us in our situation, it never will be possible to separate the two. The authority of the Bible as the word of God is dependent upon the reliability of the human messengers. If they were at fault in all respects, nothing of the

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, arguments are always open to discussion, but often the evidence is that strong that all arguments against it are overruled. The age of the human race could be a case in point.

message of God would be left. But because the purpose of the Bible as the word of God is not, in the first place, to provide us with all kinds of information, the truth of its message is not dependent upon inerrancy or infallibility on the side of the human writers.

Let me insert here for the sake of brevity an illustration.<sup>7</sup> If we leave out the first eight chapters, which consist mainly of a list of names, the Book of Chronicles in the Old Testament covers some 500 years of history. It relates this history from the viewpoint of God's covenant with Israel, concentrated in the temple in Jerusalem. It tells the story of God's love and anger because of Israel's recurrent disobedience. It ends with a call to the Israelites in exile to return to the promised land of God.

It is clear that in this book, the original readers, and we too, are confronted by God's acts of faithfulness and judgment, by his promises and commandments. In this, the book carries divine authority. Yet, the way this history is recorded does not suggest that the author(s) received their knowledge directly from God. Rather it was based on several humanly available sources. In this respect the book speaks with human authority which can be studied and evaluated accordingly. It is written within the horizon of knowledge and understanding of the time.

It is through the means of human knowledge, directed by the Spirit of God, that we are placed before God himself and confronted with the claim He has on our lives. Details of the human story might need correction according to the standards of historical research today, yet, if the whole history were just a fake, there would hardly be any divine message left. There would be no acts of God as fulfillment of his promises and warnings. In fact, there would be no promises or warnings of God in actual history. Without the reliability of the human authors, open to analysis and research as it may be, the authority of the Bible as the word of God disappears.

I realize that there is a great risk involved in the approach that I submit here. What I am doing is in fact an illustration of the incorporation of critical thought into the New Testament idea of freedom that I discussed before. As Paul expressed already in his letter to the Galatians, this freedom can easily be abused. It can only be exercised in a right way when it is directed by the Spirit of Christ. That applies not only to the field of ethics but also to knowledge. Wherever we lose sight of reality as God's fallen creation and our total dependence on his redeeming grace we will be led astray on paths that are destructive to human life as it is meant by God.

If we apply this freedom to our understanding of the authority of Scripture, we are especially at risk of misusing it. Too easily we will try to escape from the word of God where it speaks against our natural inclinations insofar as they are the result of the fall. Yet, I do not see another solution to the question how we should understand the authority of Scripture. In our time we are called to behave as spiritual adults in relation to authority and we cannot escape this in relation to the Bible. We only should be constantly aware that the exercise of freedom requires a deep sense of our fallenness and our total dependence on Christ and his Spirit.

Freedom always implies responsibility. Where it relates to the evaluation of authority, that applies even more so because authority is given by God. But we should take care especially where the word of God itself is at stake. If we know ourselves from the word of

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<sup>7</sup> See 'Faith and Science in Biblical Perspective', p.294.

God, we will be aware that the freedom we have in Christ can indeed only be exercised on the basis of a close relationship with Him. Where it concerns the word of God as it comes to us in the Scriptures, we should only make use of our freedom with 'fear and trembling',<sup>8</sup> because of the responsibility involved.

### *Authority in the Church*

Authority within the church is organized in different ways. Some churches have a hierarchical structure with a bishop or a pope on top. Others are of the presbyterian type and consider the different offices of preacher, elder and deacon to be basically of the same level. Together they form the presbytery and are, as such, responsible for the well-being of the church. Because the church is an institutional organisation, authority is always part of its structure. Specific tasks, with the competence and responsibility involved, have to be assigned to functionaries, or ecclesiastical bodies, so they are authorized for the decisions they make.

Our concern in this paper is not with ecclesiastical authority in general, but how it functions in relation to the church as a community of faith. As such, the church is based upon a unity of conviction. This unity, though, is not a matter of course. It is always threatened and, therefore, needs to be protected.

With an oversimplification, we might say that in the past for a long time the unity of faith was imposed on the members of the church. The ecclesiastical, or even the political authorities, decided about the content of true doctrine, sometimes after a long period of discussion and conflict between theologians. I do not mean to minimize the significance of the development of creedal statements within the church. My point is that, in general, the ordinary members just had to accept what they were taught. They hardly had a voice themselves in what they were asked to believe. Of course, this concerned only public confession. What people actually believed, might have been very different. As long as they did not openly oppose the teachings of the church, they would not be in trouble.

With the Reformation in the 16th century, the conditions changed only to some extent. Because of the doctrinal conflict which divided the church, people were confronted with a new situation. Sometimes they felt the freedom to make a decision for themselves. But most of the time the lines of separation were based on ecclesiastical and political developments rather than on individual choice. At the same time the Reformation did put a strong emphasis on personal faith. Teaching found a more prominent place within the church. The ordinary believer became more important. The church was seen more as a community of believers, based on common faith, than as an ecclesiastical body that could provide salvation through institutional means.

The mixed character of the new situation finds expression in the two ways in which the confession of the church can be understood as a form of unity. For one, the confession is seen as our response to the word of God. The emphasis is on the fact that in the confession we express our common understanding of Scripture. We share the same faith and therefore we give our assent to the creeds of the church. The confession itself has no authority. In case there are questions, or people arrive at a different understanding of specific points, the confession itself is no argument for its truth because it is the expression of our understanding of Scripture, and our understanding is always open to improvement. The discussion will be

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Philippians 2:12; Psalm 2:11.

based on Scripture alone. Concerning the confession, only loyalty to given consent is at stake.

But we can also look at the confession in a different way. Then it is seen as a reliable summary of the content of Scripture. The subjective element of our understanding is not denied but it does not receive much emphasis. From this perspective an appeal to the confession in matters of doctrine is especially appropriate, because in the confession the teaching of Scripture is found in a concentrated form. The confession expresses the doctrine of the church and is taught as such. To some extent the authority of Scripture is passed on to the confession. Disagreement with the confession sometimes seems almost to be taken more seriously than any problems concerning Scripture itself.

Of course, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. The confession, as the expression of our understanding of Scripture, is never seen as completely subjective. As a confession of faith, it is implied that it is reliable as to its understanding of the word of God and, therefore, has validity. From the other side, the confession, as the concise summary of the teaching of Scripture, is never seen as infallible. It is always open to correction on the basis of Scripture itself. The two approaches differ only with respect to the point where the emphasis is placed.

Yet, the difference in emphasis is important. The first view gives more room to the individual believer than the second. According to the first view each individual has to find her own way as to the relationship with God, not only concerning the central decision of faith but also in relation to her understanding of Scripture. The church will give support and guidance wherever needed, and might even speak strongly to convince the person of the truth, but will never use her authority as church to enforce anything on the person involved, but respect the person's unique responsibility and freedom. People, then, will join the church as a community of believers because they share the same faith. [NOTE "her" for person and "her" for church]

The second view will emphasize more the doctrine of salvation as entrusted to the church. Therefore, the church speaks with authority and might demand that people accept her teaching. The preaching of the church through her official agents is to be seen as the primary means by which God is addressing people. The church is understood more as an institution that is upheld by its offices than as a community of believers. To join the church, then, means to accept her teaching and authority because she is entrusted with the truth about God.

Again, putting the two views over against each other in this way, might neglect the fact that they refer to two sides of the church that should go together. Yet, the difference in emphasis is of importance because it often is combined with a different view of authority. In the second view the authority of the church is put to use in order to make people accept the Christian faith. It is assent to the doctrine of the church that counts. That is the reason why there is less room for the individual to find her own way in her relationship with God. Therefore, there is much emphasis on the authority of the church in matters of doctrine and teaching.

Especially in our time this approach meets with strong opposition. The emphasis on individual responsibility, which was part of the Reformation, was taken up in the Enlightenment. In this respect there is indeed a continuity. But, over against the Reformation, the Enlightenment rejected all kinds of authority that could not be based in human freedom and autonomous reason. As we have seen before, trust in the power of reason is shaken nowadays, but mistrust in its authority remains firm. These days, to accept religious truth on the basis of institutional authority is highly suspect. Basic beliefs should grow out of inner conviction. They should not be adopted because some authorities say so. This applies to any

ecclesiastical authority, protestant preachers as much as roman-catholic priests or even the pope.

Of course, also in our time people do often accept what other people say. They might even follow all kinds of voices in an uncritical way. Intuitions about what suits people's feelings are often more important than rational argument. Yet, an appeal to authority does not convince people about the truth of religious doctrine. External means have lost their power. Here lies a real challenge for the church. Even more so, because an appeal to the authority of the Bible as the word of God has lost its power too. What counts is inner conviction. So we have to think through what we believe and show its truth as to the reality of life by living it.

If we truly believe in the redeeming power of the word of God this challenge is not something negative. On the contrary, it can only be refreshing for the life of the church to think through her faith and live by it. After all, the word of God does not depend for its power on external authorities, it has an inner power of conviction because it is true to reality. Besides, it will never reach the heart of people without the work of the Spirit. That holds for our time as much as for any other.

There is a problem, though, that we have to face. The teaching of the church concerns both the constant core of the Christian faith and how this core relates to the historical situation and its peculiar horizon of knowledge. To give an example, the basic confession of the church, that God is the creator of the universe and all it contains, should be applied to the universe as it is understood in each particular time. This implies that there is identity and difference in the church's understanding that the world is God's creation. For it is clear that the knowledge we have now on the basis of scientific research is much different from the view that is expressed in the Bible or the way people thought in the Middle Ages. As long as Christians in each specific time agree in their understanding of the biblical teaching and in their assessment of scientific knowledge, there is no problem. But it is clear, at least in our time, that Christians differ greatly among themselves in both respects. If there is no authority in the church anymore that can decide these matters, because all emphasis is on argument and inner conviction how, then, will it be possible to achieve the unity of understanding that is a condition for the community of believers?

Similar questions can be raised in matters of moral conduct. Views about the position of women in the church or about homosexual behaviour cut deep divisions between Bible believing Christians. Sometimes they accept each other as sincere in their acceptance of biblical authority, often they do not. Anyhow, differences of conviction in these matters immediately affect ecclesiastical practice. Are women allowed to be an elder or a pastor? Is it possible that faithful members of the church live out their homosexual nature in a relationship of fidelity and love and, therefore, are fully accepted, *e.g.*, to take part in the Lord's supper? In these matters decisions cannot be avoided. If the differences are maintained, are divisions in the church the only way to deal with them, because there is no body to speak with such authority that its decision is accepted by all people involved?

One of the consequences of the fact that our time puts so much emphasis on personal conviction is the wide variety of opinion. This also affects the church and it may threaten its unity as a community of believers. To deal with this situation it will be more necessary than ever to distinguish between what is essential to the Christian faith and what is not. In other words, what are the issues we can differ about and what are not? But this distinction cannot be made just in terms of elements of doctrine and practices in life to which we need to assent or

about which we can disagree. Agreement in this sense is, indeed, a necessary part of the unity of the church. But it is not sufficient. Just because inner conviction has been shown to be important, the unity of faith, that is needed, consists primarily in the recognition of each other as being truly committed to God in Jesus Christ.

Commitment in this sense is, of course, not just a matter of attitude. It includes true knowledge of Christ, who He is, what He has done. It includes awareness of our sinfulness, of our total dependence on God for true life. All of these we can, and should, express in words of confession. At the same time, in the face of important differences, we need more than a spoken or written confession. We need to sense its authenticity in life.

We are not able to really assess what is in people's hearts. Yet, the emphasis on personal responsibility for what we believe and how we behave, as part of the maturity to which we are called as an "acquirement" of our time, means that we relate to one another in the church not just on the basis of external agreement but primarily because we recognize each other as united in our willingness to commit ourselves completely to the service of Christ. Only on that basis can differences be accepted on matters that are of real concern to us, as in the examples given above.

So, the conclusion must be, that if our time, because of its precarious maturity in relation to authority, is characterized by a greater diversity than in the past, within the church this diversity can only be accepted on the basis of a deeper unity. As a community of believers in Christ we have to once more think through what we believe in the face of the challenges of our time. Because of that we might come to different conclusions, different from the past but also different from one another. In this situation it is all the more important that we take care of what is fundamental to our faith.

There might be some differences too as to the question concerning the boundaries of what is fundamental. But there never should be disagreement about what is at the very centre of what we believe. At this point the church cannot do without the use of discipline. The community of believers as a whole, but even more so those who carry special responsibility as overseers, should act as guardians over this basic unity of faith.

Here the question of authority in the church touches upon the understanding of the authority of Scripture. There are many questions in relation to the authority of Scripture, as we have seen, but the church exists on the basis of the confession that in the Scripture she has received the word of God to humankind and that she has understood its central message. Individual freedom on the basis of maturity in relation to our understanding of Scripture should never ignore that the church as the body of Christ is entrusted with the word of God. She, therefore, has the authority, both in terms of responsibility and of competence, to speak this word, as it decides about life and death. As long as she wants to be faithful to her calling she cannot escape this task. And she should be respected for it by all those who want to be part of her. In this regard, it is not the individual that decides, not even the community of believers, but the authority of the word of God. If this does not function anymore, the church has lost her meaning.

But the unity of the church does not only concern what is underneath the differences. It should come to expression also in the way the differences are dealt with. They should never be taken for granted as if the differences themselves define our faith. In the assessment of scientific developments scientific experts within the different fields, philosophers and theologians, should cooperate together with other members of the church, both in a local and a wider sense, to work for a common understanding. All the talents of the church should be

used to achieve maturity in our comprehension of the faith and how it applies to the world around us.

The same holds for our discernment of the will of God for our lives. If there is disagreement within the church about these matters people should continue to search for a common understanding. The unity of the church should not only be expressed in mutual acceptance, even in the face of painful differences, but also in a growing harmony with respect to the issues at stake. The differences might not disappear, but we never should be content with them. Because, it is not our personal conviction that decides about what is true and good, but the authority of God as the source of all that is good and true.

It might very well be that what I propose is already practiced in the church. In fact, I would be surprised if this were not the case. At least, at some places and to some extent. Too often though, I think, the church is still struggling with the condition of modern and postmodern influences by wavering between sticking to tradition and allowing freedom that is not the freedom in Christ. Actually, the road that leads to life, also in our present situation, will be a narrow one, as Christ says in Matthew 7:14.