

Sources of Authority

Volume 2

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Volume 2

Contemporary Churches

Edited by Tamara Grdzelidze

Faith and Order Paper No. 218



**World Council
of Churches**
Publications

SOURCES OF AUTHORITY, VOLUME 2

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Cover design: Adele Robey/Phoenix Graphics, Inc.

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Book design and typesetting: 4 Seasons Book Design/Michelle Cook

ISBN: 978-2-8254-1603-7

World Council of Churches

150 route de Ferney, P.O. Box 2100

1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

<http://publications.oikoumene.org>

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Foreword

It was an enriching experience to be a part of the ecumenical study on sources of authority in the early church and in ecclesial traditions. Theoretically, various sources transmitting authority are, in most cases, commonly shared, but in practice, the angle and gravity of their approaches differ. These sources therefore become authoritative at the moment of functioning in those particular ways. No source of authority is envisaged in isolation from its setting, separated from questions on where and how it endorses authority.

For example, for the Orthodox tradition, the writings of the church fathers constitute an important source of authority. St John of Damascus defined the Tradition of the church as the “boundaries put up by our Fathers.” Before him, St Athanasius of Alexandria spoke of the “Tradition from the beginning” and of the “faith of the universal Church, which the Lord gave, the apostles preached and the fathers preserved.” These words express the essence of Christian faith as “apostolic,” “patristic,” and “orthodox,” a faith rooted in holy scripture and holy Tradition, an inseparable component of which are the works of the holy fathers.

The common study of the sources of authority shows that the church cannot exist without, beyond, or above authority. The church sustains the authority of God. And here comes the clash with the secular world. Discovering that sources of authority are inseparable from earthly life, Christians must learn how to bridge this clash without either rejecting the secular world or adjusting their principles to those alien to the Christian faith. The task is not easy. Studying various sources of authority of the Christian faith ecumenically helps Christians with this difficult task of bringing Christian virtues into the secular world or giving a common witness.

All authority in the church is for the glory of God!

Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev

Editor's Introduction

Ecumenical theology has been marked by the notion of “growth”: Christians from various liturgical traditions and cultural backgrounds come together with the desire to understand one another at a more profound level so that it leads to their growing into an intimate and ongoing relationship of discovery and appreciation. (The highest expression of such growth is love.) This growing into an ongoing relationship is permeated with the notion of authority in the churches in a very specific way, defining the level of distinctiveness or rapprochement between churches.

Why does ecumenical theology today deem the question on sources of authority to be important? This is not the first occasion in its history that “authority” has emerged as a focus for ecumenical reflection. Theological answers to how Christian traditions make their distinctive entries into ecumenical conversations are intimately related to “authority.” Even in those traditions that do not seem explicitly open to changes, the modus of authority adjusts to specific demands.

Ecumenical multilateral and bilateral conversations have been dealing with the issue of authority to a certain degree. Outcomes of this consultation are closely linked with other Faith and Order studies on ecclesiology¹ and discernment of moral issues in the church.²

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 27–28, paragraphs 48–51. Authority has been one of the most widely discussed issues at bilateral dialogues. Here are only a couple of the reports with the word “authority” in the title: *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III*, Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue, 1998; and three dialogues under the title *Authority in and of the Church*, Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue, 1993, 1995, 1998. See *Growth in Agreement III, International Dialogue, Texts and Agreed Statements*, 1998–2005, Jeffrey Gros, FSC, Thomas F. Best, Lorelei F. Fuchs, SA, eds., Faith and Order Paper No. 204 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007), 60–81; 12–22.

2. <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/moral-discernment-in-the-churches-a-study-document>.

Having the Faith and Order Commission embarking on sources of authority in ecclesiastical traditions had been viewed as a natural continuation of the ecumenical hermeneutics of the early church writings.³ This time, the Commission dedicated itself to studying various sources of authority, according to the choice of each tradition. Eventually, the consultation ended up with nine Christian traditions speaking about sources that their respective churches think have a certain authority. The list of sources of authority, the consultation decided, must be expanded in the future, but most importantly, the search for ecumenical discernment on “what God is saying to the faithful through these sources” must continue.⁴

Some of the outcomes of such an exercise had been predicted: for example, that most of the sources named as authoritative for each tradition would find echoes in others. However, there were surprises to discover regarding *the manner* in which different sources function as authority. Reflection in the meeting did not fully meet the Commission's expectation that it would reveal a list of different sources contributing to the authority in the church. Although a list of different sources was provided, it became clear that each source contributes in a very specific way to the church's authority, and these specific ways of contributing define their roles for various traditions.

It was a privilege of the consultation to have two Indigenous theologians speak about their sources of authority. The word “authority” in their context, as well as a discourse on the unity of the church, is charged with the negative consequences of the past: colonialism was badly mixed with church authority, and submission to church authority was taken for Christian unity.

Authority appears on the list of less popular words not only among Indigenous peoples, but in the entire postmodern discourse, which shows a tendency of decline in the culture of authority. During a serious conversation, the word needs an explanation: authority as *auctoritas*/sacred law or *potestas*/state law? Authority as authenticity or credibility? Sources of authority or authoritative sources?

The ultimate authority in the church is Jesus Christ and his ministry; his words and deeds are models for understanding the authority with which he sealed the ministry of all in his name. There are plenty of types and images in the gospels—teaching followed by miracles, forgiveness of sins, and showing ways of salvation—demonstrating the substance of authority

3. *Sources of Authority, vol. 1: The Early Church*, Faith and Order Paper No. 217 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014).

4. See last paragraph in the Report from the Consultation.

in the church. It is at this point that churches start interpreting what this authority is and how it works. The simplest answers to these questions raised around authority lead toward vivid examples, such as the lives of holy people, where authority and authenticity go hand in hand.

The ambivalence of authority in the church is one of the most complex issues in church life. Authority, on the one hand, implies subversion: “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Matt. 20:26-28). On the other hand, it cooperates with worldly powers, since it is always exercised by human beings. Hence, the big challenge for the church is to be political but to exercise its authority with “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16) and with the authority of God the Trinity, as revealed in scripture.

The authority of God is opposed to worldly authority; it does not seek or want to be in power as the world knows it. In Luke 4, the devil tests Jesus by offering his own authority, which pleases anyone who receives it (v. 5f.). Jesus does not merely reject the authority of the devil, but contests it with the authority of the Lord: one does not live by bread alone (4:4), one worships and serves only God (4:8), one does not put God to the test (4:12). Then crowds recognized his authority through his teaching. They were astounded at his words because he spoke with authority (*exousia*; 4:32), and while being amazed at his command/control over unclean spirits, they wondered with what authority and power Jesus did this (*exousia* and *dunamis*; 4:36). Here a parallel can be drawn between the peace of Jesus in John 14 and the authority of Jesus in Luke 4: neither the peace nor the authority of Jesus are of this world; they are of the new life Jesus offers. Therefore, authority in the gospels—and its synonymous words, such as “power”—should be seen through the prism of the new life, the new world, that Jesus has offered here and that is to be fulfilled in the age to come. The authority of the gospels is the eschatological reality. It is not reduced to the worldly life; rather, it has been planted in the life of the church, but with the expectation of its full realization in the age to come. This understanding of authority in the church excludes its absolute character in the worldly life on earth. Any authority in the church is the worldly expression of God the Trinity, of Christ whose earthly ministry implanted the antinomy of authority: lowering oneself in the service of others, loving the whole of God’s creation, and exercising his authority against injustice.

How do the churches reflect on authority today? Is there a common pattern of thought and behaviour with regard to authority? Do churches, through their channels of authority, try to implant the authority of Jesus as shown in Luke 4? The anticipated answer to this last question would be a positive one by all churches: yes, they do implant the authority of Jesus, or, to convey it with much more humility, they try to do so.

It is true that different aspects of worldly life also empower churches to teach and act authoritatively; however, a pending question over ecclesial teaching and decisions is whether this authority matches what Jesus taught about integrity and humility and service to the ill and the poor.

Many defining words for “authority” and “source” were used in the consultation in Moscow in 2011: origin, mediated, independent, instrumental, and more.

The consultation proved that when one important aspect of church life is emphasized as a source of authority, it cannot stand by itself; rather, it has many links with other corresponding aspects of church life. The evidence was brought from the interpretation of the Orthodox image of Christ in the church, called Pantocrator, “all-powerful.” The image of the Christ-Pantocrator is depicted as one presiding over the throne, with the gospels in his left hand and blessing his creation with his right hand. Even the supreme source of authority in the church—scripture—does not appear in isolation, but is conjoined with the reality of the divine creation.

In the context of discussions over differences between *potestas* and *autoritas*, a question arose: Does a source function authoritatively, or does it equip authoritative judgment with power? It became clear that authority in the church is characterized not only rationally, but also in terms of feelings: one *knows* authority in the church, but one also *feels* it. Another surprise was to understand that, theoretically, authority in the church may be expected in one place, but in practice may be discovered in another place. Consequently, a question was raised about its functions.

The authority of hierarchy, the Orthodox say, is freely and voluntarily accepted. Hierarchy in the church is one of the means of expressing service to Christ. Hierarchy as introduced by the apostles is an expression of the organized spiritual life; it introduces the spiritual order, or *taxis*. The episcopal oversight coming down from the apostles is an expression of authority in the church. The Orthodox paper draws its inspiration largely from the Corpus Areopagiticum, the Celestial Hierarchy and the Ecclesial Hierarchy, where the word “hierarchy” was supposed to be coined as a confluence

of the “sacred” and the “source of principles.”⁵ Hierarchy—sealed with the divine stamp—introduces the divine order and promotes imitation to the divine likeness. It exists for leading to God: “The goal of a hierarchy is to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with him. . . . Hierarchy causes its members to be images of God in all respects, to be clear and spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of primordial light and indeed of God himself” (CH III, 2).⁶

Such an understanding of hierarchy, indeed, is a source of authority in the church. The pending question, however, remains: How has the hierarchical principle been fulfilled in each local context?

It was in papers about a very different source of authority from hierarchy—science, which in this particular context implies the natural and social sciences—that the issue of eschatological relations was raised. A difference between scientific research and the religious quest lies in clinging to cause-and-effect relationships in the former, and eschatological relations in the latter. Science, formative for any person regardless of religious affiliation, indirectly affects ethical decisions in the Lutheran churches. On the other hand, science can be misjudged from a religious point of view. Even though science is very important for a person making an authoritative decision in the church, can it have the same value as scripture? Here the two Lutheran papers reveal different approaches.

The sacredness of the divine creation must be a common understanding among the divided churches as well as a chasm, a division between the created and the uncreated. How do the sacred and profane relate to God revealed in creation? Has an approach to science as a source of authority been related to reason as a source of authority?

The Anglican tradition names three sources of authority: scripture, Tradition, and reason. From this paper it becomes evident that these three sources define the Anglican methodology; therefore, the question raised in this context was around the gravity of authority. Where does it lie exactly? Is it through the methodology (based on these sources) that authority is being realized? In other words, does methodology convey how to understand and believe? Richard Hooker, the “patriarch” of the Anglican tradition, convinced his fellow believers that reason was the time-tested wisdom (versus Tradition?). The faculty of reasoning, according to Hooker, enables

5. Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989), 38.

6. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete Works*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 154.

humans to discern God's nature and goodness. The question remains about discernment of God's goodness in the rest of God's creation. Reason as a source of the knowledge of God brings to mind the sacredness of matter: Is there any link between the two? There is a lack of clarity around whether the reasonableness of creation leaves room for a mystical experience of the divine revelation.

Here is a legitimate question for all believers: Is experience of God in our embodied lives a source of authority? In a way, it is possible that even the ordinary expressions of human life might carry the wisdom of the divine authority. The immediate sense of the divine, felt in its authenticity and authority, is a mystical experience that the great mystics would try to express in words, but they always felt unsatisfied with the description. Human experience of God is a source of authority, the Reformed paper claims. Can any other human experience be such a source? Or can human experience be instrumental in searching for God's authority? With regard to authority in the church, responding to God's call can be a path followed in the light of one's experience. The pending question is whether such an authoritative experience is transmitted from generation to generation.

Is this experience the same as the discernment of the Holy Spirit in the Charismatic churches or among the Baptist congregations? The sovereignty of the Holy Spirit, according to Pentecostal spirituality, works beyond the ecclesial reality. The latter statement, however, sounds familiar to many other Christian spiritualities or, indeed, to ecumenical spirituality. All the African Independent Churches, those that initially broke off from mission churches and claim reliance on the Holy Spirit, continue to multiply in number, and the outstanding authority attributed to the Holy Spirit in their spirituality and liturgical life does not prevent the churches from being divided. Interestingly, the African Independent Churches are eager to participate in the ecumenical movement: as soon as they break off, they start looking for a unifying platform. Why do they divide in the first place? The authority Jesus taught is not to blame.

To a large extent, the question of the Charismatic churches—Pentecostal and African Independent Churches—about the discernment of the Holy Spirit in action and what it tells the faithful individually or communally remains of the same importance for all. No tradition argues against the presence or authority of the Holy Spirit in the spiritual life or feels estranged

from the assertion that “Pentecostals listen closely to Scripture, expecting to hear the Holy Spirit speak through it in an authoritative manner.”⁷

When the Baptist ecclesiology claims that a local congregation is a full expression of the church, one immediately thinks of catholicity in the church. Since Christ is present in the congregation, the latter becomes a source of authority insofar as it possesses the mediated authority. This was a helpful moment, to realize how authoritative sources vary in highlighting the supreme authority of Christ in the church. In searching the mind of Christ, a congregation acquires authority in this covenantal relationship; commitment to Christ is the source of authority. The early Baptists’ covenantal life did not know the separation between love of God and love of one’s neighbour, nor between eternal grace and the covenantal agreement God makes with God’s church.

Through the liturgical texts, the Oriental Orthodox demonstrated the authority of the spirit of common faith and prayer in the life of the church. For the liturgical ethos, hymnody is, indeed, authoritative, but is it a source to rely on in decision making?

It is remarkable that the Roman Catholic introduction to the magisterium as a source of authority draws heavily on the official documents of the Catholic Church: remarkable since it speaks about the universality of Catholic ecclesiology. The magisterium has the authority to protect the faithful from deviations from divine truth. Christ himself is an expression of God’s love to his creation. It would be of great interest to be able to register the level of discrepancy of the authority of the magisterium in various cultural contexts.

Intrusion into the space of Indigenous peoples seems to have been going on for many years. The mission churches—often called “conquerors”—targeted local cultures in the past by imposing a model of church with no roots in a local culture. Now Western economic systems have been eroding Indigenous cultures. Under these circumstances, Indigenous theologians today insist on doing theology within their own cultural and spiritual heritage, making the gospel meaningful through liberating elements. Since the *sola scriptura* approach affected the creative aspect of Indigenous culture, Indigenous theologians today employ the hermeneutics of multiple voices in their contextual reading of the gospel. The “many voices” also include voices of different faiths. They remain honest in discerning the Holy Spirit when culture and gospel step into a dialogue. Certainly, Indigenous theology today

7. See the paper by Rev. Dr Cecil M. Robeck Jr.

questions the unity of the church: Does it serve oppression and dominion, or protection of diversity and freedom?

More questions emerged in the consultation than answers, more challenges than affirmations. Reflection on “authority” within and from churches is very different from any other parallel processes such as academic or political. Churches seek answers in fields that are crucial to its being but alien to the outside world such as human experience of God, discernment of the Holy Spirit, co-operation between fellow faithful, faith, and scripture. All these reflections in the consultation were understood as raw material for future work.

Discussions around the papers at the Moscow consultation have proved that the process of discernment of the mind of God in every age or context has different implications for the nature of authority in the church.⁸

Tamara Grdzeldze

8. The editor expresses deep gratitude to Alexander Freeman for his assistance in the preparation of the consultation and of this publication.

1. Experience as a Source of Authority for Faith

Susan Durber

Christians have found very different ways of describing or ascribing importance to experience, whether religious experience in particular or human experience in general. Ask some Christians when they were saved, for example, and they will tell you the story of their conversion or coming to faith and the moment or the time when, for them personally, faith became real. The experience will have been vivid, personal, and convincing, and they will testify to knowledge of God on its authority. Ask other Christians to speak of their personal experience of God and they will be tongue-tied and unsure, preferring to speak not of their personal experience, but of the faith revealed to the apostles, or of the word of God in scripture, or of the faith of the church.

Ask many Christians to speak of how they know about God and they will likely speak, if they speak of experience at all, of religious experience. But there are those who also suggest that God may be known not only in the experiences we label as religious, but even in those more everyday things of life that happen to almost all of us, even if in very different ways. Such people suggest that though certain people may experience God in an immediate way, perhaps we are all slow at times to recognize how God comes to each of us in the embodied lives we lead, in the experiences of our ordinary human days.

We might feel that we have not read enough of the Bible or the spiritual classics, or that we do not live remarkable enough lives, and so we do not see, you might say, that all the while we are living, learning, feeling, working, loving, suffering, and rejoicing, we are becoming human beings with rich and deep resources of situated wisdom and knowledge—even, perhaps, knowledge of God. Is it strange that someone might regret not having read the writings of the desert fathers or mothers, but does not see that the desert spaces in their own life may be a rich source of knowledge and insight, even

of God? Is it ironic that a woman might wish she had more academic knowledge about the Marian tradition, but does not see that her own experience of motherhood might be a deep well from which to draw life-giving water? Is it sad that someone who labours hard with their body might believe that a proper Christian would have read more books, when we need more people to speak of the gospel from the experience of the body? Could it be that even the ordinary experiences of human life, and perhaps especially these experiences, might in some way carry some authority as sources of wisdom of the God who made us?

We have a—sometimes unspoken—suspicion of the wisdom that human experience, in all its variety, brings. This is partly, of course, because we know that experiences, left unthought or unexamined, can be dangerous and deceptive. We know that experience is never raw and unmediated, that there is never an experience that comes to us directly without already being interpreted even as it comes. And we have learned how self-deceiving and self-centred we can be, and that our experiences and their interpretations can so easily be turned simply to serve our own purposes and not to liberate others or serve the common good. We have learned that anything that claims to be self-authenticating (“it is true because I know it is”) will not do as a test of truth. And we have learned, above all, to believe that open talk of direct experiences of God is as likely to be interpreted as symptomatic of mental illness as of sainthood. But even so, is it possible that God is becoming known to us as we live and experience our particular human lives? Is it possible that our experiences, even very ordinary ones, may be a source of knowledge of God?

I write from the Reformed tradition, which has spoken with more than one voice about the role of experience in the search for knowledge of God. On the one hand, the Reformed tradition has stressed above all that it is in and through the scriptures that God speaks to God’s people, that the Bible is the bearer of authority in the church (though in many communities among the Reformed, it has also been said that the Bible must be interpreted always under “the guidance of the Holy Spirit” as the Spirit moves among the community of God’s people; “the Word” is not identified with the text itself, but is spoken in that holy alchemy of text and community and Spirit). The Reformed have also emphasized the glory and the transcendence, the “otherness” of God, the God who in some sense must always remain *unknown* to us. Part of the Reformation protest of the 16th century was against a dominant spirituality of immanence, which was judged to have reduced God to

the level of the everyday and to have distorted, through images, for example, our understanding of the invisible and transcendent nature of God. David Cornick writes that “Calvin’s theology can best be understood as a series of fugues on the transcendence of God.”¹

Karl Barth, in the 20th century, reaffirmed this classic Reformed emphasis on the transcendence and majesty of God, at a time when God had been “captured” and shamefully reduced by an ideology of nation, earth, and race. For Barth, God is known through the revealed word of God in scripture. (“Jesus loves me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so.”) He was profoundly suspicious of any claims that God might be known through human experiences other than those testified to by scripture. And he had good cause, as a theologian of the 20th century, to see how theologies derived from human experience can be so distorted by human sinfulness.

Yet, there are also profound and distinctive themes within the Reformed tradition that affirm human experience as a legitimate and even a necessary starting point for theology. It would be obvious to point, for example, to Schleiermacher, who developed a systematic understanding of the Christian faith as the fullest expression of religious experience, which in turn, he believed, was the profoundest expression of human experience. And, though many might dismiss Schleiermacher, post-Barth, conceiving him as “the father of liberal theology,” it is not so easy to dismiss significant themes in Calvin’s own theology that testify to the ways the world in which God has set us is itself a potential source of knowledge of God. Though Calvin emphasized the transcendence and ineffability of God, though Calvin was suspicious of the powers of human reason and the possibility that we might work out the things of God for ourselves, he did believe profoundly that we live as human beings in a world he called “the theatre of God’s glory.” God may be immortal and invisible, but God bears witness to God-self in the world in which we live. Calvin wrote that “this skilful order of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God who is otherwise invisible.”²

A spirituality shaped by Calvin’s theology becomes a worldly spirituality, affirming that the world is God’s—that all, even social, political, and personal life, is sacred space. God is not confined to separate spiritual realms,

1. David Cornick, *Letting God Be God: The Reformed Tradition*, Traditions of Christian Spirituality (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008), 100.

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1v.1 at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes>.

but pervades the whole of human experience. For Calvin, true faith was to be lived in the ordinary lives of the people. This was why his first instinct in Geneva was to lock the doors of the cathedral when services were not taking place, in case the people were misled into thinking that God could only be known and experienced and served there. Calvin thus helped to shape a tradition of faith, a way of being Christian, that found holiness in the ordinary tasks of human life; from business to babies, from government to growing things. The whole realm of human experience became a potential meeting place with God in a newly Reformed understanding of the “immanence” of the transcendent God.

The Reformed tradition has continued to be characterized by Calvin’s appreciation of the world as “the theatre of God’s glory” and to value a practice of faith that is intently engaged with the life of the world. Jonathan Edwards, in the 18th century, was someone who wrestled with holding together the God revealed in scripture with the ordered world described by Isaac Newton and the revivalist experiences of evangelical faith. For Edwards, as for many, what was important was to ask what all this discovery and experience revealed about the truths of God.

In more recent times, it is perhaps the growing awareness of the significance of our more intimate experiences, and our knowledge of the human psyche, that has been celebrated as a source for wisdom and theological insight. For example, Frederick Buechner, an American Presbyterian novelist and theologian, is one who uses the gift of his own experience in the search for truth. He has written much autobiography, not as an exercise in personal hubris, but as a reaching for understanding of his own life and that of others. He believes that this reflection on what has happened to any of us is in itself a central task of theology. He writes,

If God speaks to us at all in this world, if God speaks anywhere, it is into our personal lives that he speaks. Someone we love dies, say. Some unforeseen act of kindness or cruelty touches the heart or makes the blood run cold. We fail a friend, or a friend fails us, and we are appalled at the capacity we have for estranging the very people in our lives we need the most. Or maybe nothing extraordinary happens at all—just one day following another, helter-skelter, in the manner of days. We sleep and dream. We wake. We work. We remember and forget. We have fun and are depressed.

And into the thick of it, or out of the thick of it, at moments of even the most humdrum of our days, God speaks.³

Few could doubt, if they have read Buechner's novels and his many published sermons and reflections, that a deep and wise attention to the intricacies and complexities of human experience, when woven with the powerful narratives of the Bible, provides a crucible for theological truth. Buechner not only uses the testimony of human experience to relate what is previously revealed in scripture, but he discerns within the textures of his own life, and the lives of others, the thread of God's truth. It perhaps requires his skill and insight to do it, but his raw material, if any material is ever really raw, is certainly the text of experience.

In the field of theology, now known in many places as practical theology, experience—and not necessarily only religious experience, but the experiential material that makes up most of our lives—has become the starting place for theology. Many have taken a deliberate move away from thinking of theology as something “revealed” or “thought” and then “applied” (to human lives), but have suggested that the theological task is always one of interpretation, and perhaps primarily of the interpretation of experience. Theology becomes, then, not a pure discipline that is secondarily “applied,” but always work that is contextual, particular, implicit, and responsive to human lives, situations, and predicaments. It begins with experience, then moves to reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. And, most importantly, this task, this practical work of theology, is not only for a small number of the specially trained, but for all disciples. The discipline of what has become known as practical theology is continually developing. In recent times, there has been a return to seeing the classic sources of theology (Bible, Tradition, and even reason) as themselves valuable expressions of experience and of truth. There has been a move away from discarding the authorities of the past, and instead something like a reclaiming of them as precious and authoritative testimony to the reflective and interpreted experiences of human beings who are both like us and different from us. And practical theology has advocated ways of thinking, writing, and acting that will engage our own reflections on contemporary experience in a conversation with voices from the traditions of faith and with perhaps more traditional sources of authority. But it has been resolute in affirming the importance of

3. Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey: A Memoir of Early Days* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 2.

experience (and of seeing that all theological text flows from experience in some sense), and particularly of experiences and voices that have hitherto not been heard within the traditions of faith. Questions that many theologians in this field are keen to ask include these: Whose experience is being listened to? Whose experience has been ignored? Whose interests have been served by the privileging of some experiences over others?

Recognizing the ways in which human experience can be self-deceiving, theologians of experiences have worked hard to show how insights born of experience might be tested and weighed. Some have noticed, for example, that if experience is really to be taken seriously, then its very diversity and difference must be taken seriously. There is no “general” human experience, and if some people say there is, it is usually their own that they suppose is “general” or, more accurately, normative. A story that illustrates the need to take the diversity of experience seriously is told by the Jesuit preacher Walter Burghardt in his book *Preaching: The Art and the Craft*. He includes in his book an address he gave at a national symposium on preaching, with a response to it given by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. The debate illustrates powerfully the potential significance of recognizing that any life experience is particular and not normative, and that any life experience might speak with some authority.

In his own lecture, Burghardt advocates “study impregnated with experience” as a powerful preparation for preaching. He declares that his preaching is least effective when he experiences nothing, that careful study is never enough on its own. He then describes the process he went through in preparing a particular sermon for Advent Sunday. He writes of how he read Shakespeare and Gerard Manley Hopkins, Tennessee Williams and John Henry Newman in an effort to think as broadly as possible about human experience.

Fiorenza argued on the day at the symposium that the “experience” of which Burghardt had written was actually only male experience. She said, and Burghardt quotes her in his book, that

For all practical purposes women of the past and of the present have not preached and are in many Christian churches still excluded from defining the role of proclamation in terms of their own experience. In such an ecclesiastical institution, the danger exists that the homily will not articulate the experience of God as the rich and pluriform experience of God’s people, but that the male preacher will articulate his own experience and

will declare and proclaim his own particular experience as the experience of God par excellence. What is limited and particular to his experience will be proclaimed as universal and paradigmatic for everyone.⁴

Fiorenza encourages male preachers to be attentive to a wider range of human experience and reflects on the too-many sermons she has heard against the “male” sins of desire for power, of hubris and pride. She favours a more ecclesial and less clerical style of preaching. In turning to Burghardt’s sermon for Advent, she writes: “I was surprised that he does not think of taking into account the experiences of pregnant women and their sense of self.”⁵

The experience of men must no longer be allowed to be seen as the paradigm of all human experience. The experience of living in a woman’s body is different than that of a man’s, and demands to be named, interpreted, and remade, because it is a source of knowledge. The same could of course be said about the experience of all sorts of other people who make up the glorious variety of humanity that God has made.

As we become more skilled at reflecting on the significance of our own life experience, we develop a proper kind of humility before the life experiences of others, for their experience is also a source of knowledge and therefore bears a kind of authority. This is why many of us will seek to expand our own experience. Experiences of other parts of the world, other nations, peoples, and church traditions, will not only be interesting and add diversity to life, but will also give us insight into truths about the world, about us, and even about God.

But there is also a humility required of us before the experiences of others, experiences that cannot be ours, but that we might need to recognize and affirm as authoritative. For example, the British theologian Heather Walton, in her book *Imagining Theology*,⁶ argues that the real question for a Christian is not about the authority I or my experience might carry, but is about with whom I choose to take a stand. Experience, she argues, is always located somewhere and is always from within a particular context. Experience is always usable, she says, but never innocent. We have to choose where we stand and with whom, and whose experience we trust. She cites Sandra

4. Walter Burghardt, *Preaching: The Art and the Craft* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 70.

5. *Ibid.*, 76.

6. Heather Walton, *Imagining Theology: Women, Writing and God* (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

Harding, who has developed the concept of “strong objectivity.” There is no view from nowhere—the “view” is always from somewhere, but perhaps there are some places from which it is possible to make a claim for experience to be heard. Heather Walton would argue that those who suffer most deeply in this world are those whose experiences we should listen for—those for whom, as she puts it, “the shoe pinches.” In some way at least, the experience of these (the little ones?) carries an authority that the experience of the rich and powerful does not. Perhaps, as theologians, one task is to listen to such experience and to speak it where it has been silenced.

In a perhaps more familiar way, Rowan Williams says something similar when he speaks of the powerful witness of particular people. In writing of how it is that so many come to faith or come to the realization that the Christian faith is true, he suggests that many of us are most influenced by our experience of particular people, and by our learning from them of how it can be to lead to human life in a way that has a kind of deep and attractive integrity. He writes, “we trust some kinds of people. We have confidence in the way they live; the way they live is a way I want to live, perhaps can imagine myself living in my better or more mature moments . . . faith has a lot to do with the simple fact that there are trustworthy lives to be seen.”⁷

What Rowan Williams says is that we all experience people whose lives bear witness in an authoritative way and that we trust what their lives, and their experience, and our experience of them tells us—just as Heather Walton trusts that some human lives have authority because of the place where they stand and because of the experiences they have.

In her book *Preaching as Testimony*, Anna Carter Florence describes the fearful experience that many preachers share, of feeling that we must speak words we do not believe ourselves, or that we become a cipher for the quotations of others, “generic talking heads.”⁸ We leave so much of ourselves (our own experience) behind, but repeat the words of others, without really sharing them or owning them for ourselves. We crave the certainty that we are authoritative and effective, but we foolishly think this can be found only through the elaborate rituals of quotation and technique that preachers play out. As she puts it, we become and we know ourselves to be “dead preachers walking.” The answer, she suggests, is not to acquire new skills as

7. Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2007), 21–22.

8. Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 113.

a rhetorician, or even a new role within the church (like ordination). She writes,

We had to stop our endless searching for the fountain of authority. We had to give up the dream of the good preacher. Basically, we had to shut up for a while, be very still, and exercise our senses. Preaching had shown how disconnected we were, from Scripture and from ourselves; now we had to watch and wait for God to appear and show us a way of becoming whole.⁹

Perhaps it is true that we can only ever speak of God with integrity if we think of such speaking as testimony, as the voice that comes from the place where God has called us to be and from the encounter that we—as the people we truly are, in every aspect of ourselves—have with the texts of scripture and the traditions of faith. And the truth is that God has given all God's people a life from which to speak, a community from which to speak, and a tradition, which we inhabit in all their specificity. From this we may know God, and from this we must speak.

9. *Ibid.*, 114.

A Response to Susan Durber

Pablo R. Andiñach

Susan Durber's paper reminds us that everyday experience is the framework for all human reflection. It is the starting point each morning when we open our eyes, and to this daily reality we must respond with our reflections. It also warns us about the risk of searching within other people's experience (theologians, preachers, saints, etc.) for what we can and should seek in our own life. The experience of living is unique and cannot be copied. We must exercise the task of discovering God's actions in our lives. There is no doubt that other people's witness encourages and helps to perfect our own faith, though the treasure God grants makes each day of life a space that cannot be ignored in our own experience of faith building.

Susan's thoughts have clearly set forth the tension within Protestant theology; on one hand, the value of experience as a privileged space for faith, and on the other hand, the suspicion about experience. The examples of John Calvin and Karl Barth are overwhelming and set out the difficulty. In the first place, Calvin recognizes the universe as "the theatre of God's glory" and sees it as a "sort of mirror" to be able to know God, while understanding the divine as a majestic entity, different from human beings—in one way, different from human experience. The question is whether what Calvin is saying can be affirmed, that human experience is of value to establish the criteria of faith and so establish an authorized word upon it, even when it is clear that human experience is limited and cannot and never will be able to reach out and understand the fullness of God.

It is important to be able to understand this tension the way the Protestant tradition does theology. The reflection and "talk about God" takes place in the intimate conviction that all words are partial and limited. Protestant theology is very much aware that all human words are always limited to a particular time, space, and context. Therefore, any affirmation on ethical or moral issues has the tendency to suggest, rather than to establish, a restrictive criterion; it seeks pastoral guidance that will help believers take their own decision rather than apply to the unique criterion; it is concerned

about taking into account the context in which this or that situation occurs and tries to avoid establishing the universal criterion that is to be applied to all circumstances.

Susan presents very clearly that even with the Protestant concept of God as sovereign and different from humans, the same God is discovered in the everyday experience of each believer. When Calvin locks the doors of the church at a time when no service is being celebrated, he is announcing that God can be found in any place where people are found and are willing to encounter God. God does not dwell in temples; rather, God is near (“God draws near”) to where each believer is—those who, in sincerity of heart, call on God. Nevertheless, this search for God through experience cannot be understood as individual or isolated. If this were the case, there would be a risk of finding a god according to one’s wishes and hearing the desired response. For it to be an encounter with the true God, it must take place within the context of the written revelation in the word. Biblical witness is the conceptual framework that offers the criteria to distinguish between a mere spiritual experience and a Christian spiritual experience.

Protestant theology, in general, seeks a new language of expression of the permanent truths of faith in each generation. It continues and is a direct consequence of accepting the contextualization of human discourse, including that of the venerated mothers and fathers of the church. Also, it is a consequence of the recognition that social and cultural changes (which include the evolution of the same language in which humans express themselves) demand that human language, human talk about God, become accessible to each generation. The New Testament was written in Greek, a language that our Lord Jesus Christ never spoke, so the good news could be understood by the people of the time and place where the Holy Spirit extended Christ’s mission; in the same way, it is a task of each generation to formulate the faith message in new words. To do this, it is necessary to know and value charisms of each time and culture.

The Authority of Scripture

Susan says that in the Reformed tradition (or Protestant tradition), authority comes from scripture. She points out that authority on the whole must be recognized under “the guidance of the Holy Spirit.” Thus, Protestant tradition faces the problem of interpretation of scripture. The Bible is a text and it *must be read and interpreted*. Reading is also a human experience

that contains all the frailty of the human condition; for this same reason, no reading of the Bible can claim to be objective, unique, or “true” in relation to other readings. Protestant tradition chooses a grounded reading, in dialogue with other disciplines (history, theology, linguistics, philosophy, sociology, etc.): in other words, the “deeper reading of the text.” This reading, however, cannot and should never claim a higher authority than that which its own arguments can provide. Protestantism recognizes this fact, and for this reason it constructs its theology on the clear distinction between what we call “the word of God” (scripture, the biblical canon) and “the word of human beings” (theology), which includes preaching, church documents, and books written by renowned theologians. This distinction is crucial, since scripture has been recognized as permanent, transcendent, an “objective” text—in the sense that it does not grow old, is timeless, while the human discourse that interprets it is understood as ephemeral, contextual, and bound to time, society, and culture.

This was the understanding in the second century of those who decided to create the New Testament canon. They created it to distinguish between scripture and spiritual literature, letters, and sermons produced by Christians. They were not only concerned about separating the documents that were recognized as apostolic from what now is called “apocryphal gospels” and other writings (such as the *Didache*), but also tried to avoid having their own texts and sermons confused with the word of God.

Today in Protestant theology, people still read Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley, Irenaeus and John Chrysostom, because many of their perspectives still apply. However, Protestant theologians know that any human word at some time or other may lose its validity.

Protestant theology clearly values the voice of theologians and of believers who live their faith day by day in a simple way, but gives honour to faith in recognition of the distance between scripture itself and human interpretations of scripture. Although the witness of brothers and sisters over the years is valued, it cannot become normative for all generations and all times. If this were the case, would be difficult to affirm continuous action of the Holy Spirit in generating new voices and producing new challenges. History keeps going, and it changes; even though it is difficult at times to discern the acts of God, behind these changes, or at least behind those that enhance humanity, God’s hand is clearly at work. Why would God encourage changes in history and human experience while denying the opportunity to change one’s own lifestyle and expression of faith? Christian faith,

as understood within the Protestant tradition, believes that God not only allows the change and transformation of human lifestyle and language, but also demands this change so that God's word is proclaimed in a way that the world may understand.

When the Church Must Take Decisions

A different aspect of what has been mentioned is when the church as a body takes decisions. The experience is a personal one, which is useful for decisions we must make in personal space. But how is the experience of God, grounded in personal experience, revealed within a wider sphere? If experience and the language used are personal, how does the church speak as the body of Christ, as a faith community scattered throughout the world that gathers for worship, prayer, and communicating the gospel? In other words, how can the church within the Protestant tradition take collective decisions?

This is probably one of the weakest areas of Protestant ecclesiology. While the Roman Catholic Church sees itself as one church in the world and refers to the papacy and its encyclical documents as normative documents for faith, the Reformation churches lack any such structures. For the same reason, it is difficult to find official stands on current social and political issues within the majority of evangelical and Protestant churches, but in many cases this also includes doctrinal matters, which could be representative of all or at least most of them. I am a member of the Argentine Methodist Church, where a literal reading of the Bible is inconceivable, but sisters and brothers of the Methodist Church of Mexico don't believe you can read the Bible in any other way that is not a literal reading, at the risk of being excluded from sound doctrine.

Reformation churches privilege the synodal approach to governing the church. Some of these are led by bishops, others by presidents or moderators; governing structures can take many forms, but in most cases, faith or mission decisions are taken in a synodal assembly. Even within Episcopal Protestant churches, this function is recognized within the structure of the collegial body. It seems there is a deep sense in accepting this structure.

It has been mentioned that Protestants have a radical suspicion toward the human word compared to the word of God. When expressed positively, this statement affirms a clear awareness that all human declarations are contextual and provisional, which implies a natural suspicion within Protestant tradition of all "uni"-personal authority. All people respond to a psychology,

a cultural tradition, a political ideology, and even to personal experiences that often unconsciously mould our behaviour and our preferences. All are children of a particular time, and also of a particular country (the ancestral land of childhood and of intimate experiences). This is a basic human condition given by God to all human beings; it warns of the risk of granting one person the ultimate authority of the church. Protestant believers have many questions about the papal and patriarchal institutions of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches.

The synodal structure, as source of ultimate authority, seems to reflect best the life, entity, and constitution of the Christian church. However, it is not exempt from problems. Until recently, church synods were composed only of men, and in some denominations only of ordained men, which is still the case in some communities. Today, however, the common belief is that diversity enriches and enhances communities; differences reveal the previously unknown reality. One does not grow in isolation, but rather in natural and generous exchange, where one becomes nobler when receiving from others. To discover the divine gift of diversity leads to another discovery: that the church is wider and cannot be limited to only some parts of society. This leads to the modification of statutes and internal legislation so that synods can incorporate women, laypeople, youth, and representatives of the different cultures that live within the church.

Protestant churches, often so sadly divided, have much to learn from the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, particularly their self-understanding as universal and undivided. Their condition of knowing themselves as the body of Christ and their struggle to express it in their documents and positions deserve admiration. At the same time, churches of the Protestant tradition have much to contribute toward a model of governing and expressing the authority of the church that better reflects the diversity that the Lord left as a stamp on his own body.