

Church-or-word

Did the organisation of Christians Precede the Writings of the New Testament, or vice-Versa?

Church or Word – Which Comes First?

A long time ago, when still at school (1960s) I used to go to stay, occasionally, at an Anglican monastery. At that time, I was thinking about what I now understand as the whole question of interpretation of the scriptures and the faith as presented by the Church, and an elderly monk (Anglo-Catholic, of course) said, of course, the *Church* created the scriptures, and thus it is for the Church to interpret them.

Much later I discovered that in the Protestant/Evangelical traditions, they believe that the scriptures were first produced, and they created the Church, which went on to formalise Christian doctrine in the oecumenical councils in the first few centuries (ie. some while after Jesus's earthly life, and the writing of the new Testament documents).

Recently, in October 1978, Evangelicals in America produced the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (now forty years' old), which declares (among many things) that "We deny that the Scriptures receive their authority from the Church, tradition, or any other human source" (Article I), and "We affirm that the Scriptures are the supreme written norm by which God binds the conscience, and that the authority of the Church is subordinate to that of Scripture. We deny that Church creeds, councils, or declarations have authority greater than or equal to the authority of the Bible" (Article II); the Word has precedence over the Church, and all else.

Clearly, the writing of the New Testament documents came after the creation of what we call the Church, particularly if the origin of the Church was Jesus's calling of the apostles, and his commission to Peter, and the idea of Church meetings or councils is seen in the book of Acts (eg. Ch 6, 1-6). But the Protestant/Evangelical idea of the Word or the Gospel means something depending on direct inspiration, and in the Chicago Statement we see, in effect, the idea that the Word was in some sense present in the mind of God prior to/over and above its communication to/through humans.

But of course, that body of people which became what we call the Church could have existed in that form, also. If the New Testament is not/was not of purely human creation, then perhaps the Church and its (subsequent) Councils are/were not, also. To consider that the Church and its various interpretations and pronouncements have been/are purely human is to deny the work, and presence, of the Holy Spirit – and if the interpretations of the pre-Reformation Church have been purely-human, then the interpretations of the Reformers might have been also.

Maybe the human chronological origins of the Word and the Church were a sort of chicken and egg, and the answer as to *precedence* is – as so, so often – that we have to consider a *balanced* understanding of the Word and the Church – a High View of Scripture *and* a High View of the Church - and that the Christian who in any sense tries to deny or demote either, and elevate any one, is a Christian who is pointed away from authentic Christianity.

November 2018