

Introduction

Authority in the Church has long been an important and divisive issue. How the Church should regulate the conduct of its members and make decisions has been debated for centuries, and the debate has been particularly vigorous since the Reformation. In this study, I propose to examine authority by studying some of the assumptions that underlie its exercise. I take it as an axiom that the mission of the Church is to point people towards God, and to proclaim the truth of the Gospel. In doing so, it attempts to maintain the faithful in the truth, and enable and encourage them to live just and righteous lives in the sight of God. The structures of the Church must themselves reflect God's justice and righteousness if they are to do this effectively. The next two chapters will explain the differences between authority and power, and examine the current doctrines of authority of the major Churches in England, to put what follows into its proper theological context.

The Episcopal Churches in the West have traditionally worked out their authority structures through Canon Law. We shall examine their concepts of canonical jurisprudence, and compare them with theories of justice and patterns of authority from the Old and New Testaments, Greek Philosophy, Roman Law, Germanic Law and English Law. I shall not attempt a detailed historical study here; rather I shall select key points on the journey and attempt to trace the developing patterns of authority through them. The non-Episcopal Churches have generally rejected Canon Law. We shall explore the reasons for this, and see what structures they have put in its place. We shall examine whether they perform the same function as Canon Law, and if so, in what ways they operate.

Before embarking on this study, however, I must explain why I have chosen to examine the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, the Methodist Church of Great Britain, the United Reformed Church and the Baptist Union of Great Britain as the five major Churches in England. My criteria for these selections are as follows:

1. The Churches must be Trinitarian.
2. They must form a contiguous group, and have weekly attendances exceeding 100,000.
3. Each major ecclesial structure (Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational) must be represented.
4. No more than one Church of each denominational group should be included.

The first criterion excludes Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and Scientologists, all of which have more members than the URC, the smallest Church we consider.¹ The second criterion is not so straightforward, since different Churches calculate their size in different ways. The Roman Catholic Church uses Mass attendances, the Church of England uses Parish Electoral Rolls,² and the other Churches have lists of members. It is therefore difficult to compare like for like when using the statistics produced by the individual Churches.

I have therefore based my selections on the 1998 English Church Attendance Survey (Brierley, 2000, hereafter ECAS), which recorded actual worship attendances in September 1998. For comparison, I will also list the membership statistics for late 1998 produced by the individual Churches. According to the *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends* (Brierley, 1999), the membership figures for some major Churches in 1998 are given in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: British Membership Figures For Some Major Churches

Church	Membership
Church of England	1,345,000
Roman Catholic Church in England	1,021,900
Methodist Church (GB figures)	353,332
Orthodox Churches (UK figures)	202,236
Baptist Union of Great Britain (GB figures)	144,000
United Reformed Church (GB figures)	93,665

The Methodist, Baptist and United Reformed Churches also publish detailed statistics from local Churches, together with local, regional and national totals for each year. An English membership figure for 1998 can be obtained for each Church from these figures. These figures are listed in Table 1.2:

¹ Brierley (1999), p. 10.2.

² The Electoral Roll of a Parish Church is the list of members of and regular worshippers at the Church. It is not the same as a secular Electoral Roll.

Table 1.2: English Membership Figures For These Churches

Church	Membership
Church of England	1,345,000
Roman Catholic Church	1,021,900
Methodist Church	336,274 ³
Orthodox Churches (UK figures)	202,236
Baptist Union of Great Britain	128,441 ⁴
United Reformed Church	88,710 ⁵

The equivalent figures from ECAS are given in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3: English Church Attendance Survey Figures For These Churches

Church	Attendance
Roman Catholic Church	1,230,100
Church of England	980,600
Methodist Church	379,700 ⁶
Baptist Union of Great Britain	232,200
United Reformed Church	121,700
Orthodox Churches	25,200

It is clear from this that the quoted membership numbers for the Orthodox Churches greatly exceed their actual attendance, so under criterion two, I have not included them in this study. I have similarly excluded Pentecostal Churches, since ECAS reports that the largest Pentecostal group, the Assemblies of God, has 59,900 worshippers,⁷ significantly less than the threshold in criterion two. This group of Churches satisfies my third criterion, in that the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England are Episcopal, the Baptist Union is Congregational, and the URC is largely Presbyterian in structure.⁸ Chapters 8 and 9 of *Religious Trends*, and chapter 2 of *The Tide is Running Out* (Brierley, 2000), confirm that the Methodist

3 Methodist Conference (1999a), p. 67.

4 Baptist Union (1999), p.173.

5 United Reformed Church (1999a), p. 23.

6 Brierley (2000), p. 37. This figure includes other Methodists, but Brierley states (p. 38) that over 98 per cent of these are members of the Methodist Church of Great Britain.

7 Ibid., p. 42.

8 The URC's structure is a hybrid of the Presbyterian and Congregational models. I shall argue later that the Presbyterian model is dominant.

Church, the Baptist Union and the URC are by far the largest Churches of their type in England, thus satisfying my fourth criterion. These, then, are the reasons for my selection of these five Churches.

It is my thesis that the doctrines of authority adopted by the Churches we consider fall short of the New Testament doctrine of authority. I shall place particular emphasis on the juridical side of authority in this study. The Churches have developed a wide variety of structures, based on a number of influences, of which Scripture is a major source, but by no means the only one. The Roman Catholic Church has been influenced substantially by Roman legal theory, and has adopted a monarchical structure based on the Roman Empire, with a legal system developed from Roman Law. This has led to a certain inflexibility, and has at times led to authoritarianism. The Church of England, influenced by English Civil Law, has concentrated on reason and moderation, leading to a sometimes indistinct structure that seeks to keep Evangelicals, Catholics and Liberals living together in relative harmony.

The Free Churches have adopted structures that could be seen as more democratic, in an attempt to enable everyone to be as free from authoritarian control as possible. This has at times led them into individualism. There is, however, little sign of democracy either in the New Testament, or in civil government at the time the Free Churches began, so I shall argue that there is suggestive, if not conclusive evidence that this is due in part to Aristotle, and I shall further argue that the alleged Roman Catholic dependence on Aristotle, particularly in the writing of St. Thomas Aquinas, is exaggerated. We begin our study by examining authority in the New Testament, and by setting out where the Churches stand on authority now.