

Authority, Liturgy, and Thick Confessions: Themes in Lewis' *Till We Have Faces*

J. Michael Tilley
Georgetown College

There is a growing phenomenon where the children of evangelicals are increasingly attracted to more traditional, liturgical and confessional practices as a significant component of their worship. At least part of the reason why these people are attracted to these practices is because of the way that it conceives of and embodies authority. The novel *Till We Have Faces*¹, C.S. Lewis presents anew the myth of Cupid and Psyche and it portrays an interesting and provocative way of understanding a person's relation to authority.

In his retelling, he portrays Psyche's older, ugly sister as the main protagonist. The story begins as the older sister, Orual, is issuing the story as a complaint against the gods for which she believes they will have no answer. Her beloved young sister was offered as a sacrifice by their father and the religious authorities to a god, the Shadow Brute, in order to curry favor with the gods and end a famine. Later, Orual finds that her sister is married to the Shadow Brute and appears to be living alone in a desolate valley; Psyche claims, however, that she lives in a grand palace with her beloved.

As in the original myth, Psyche is forbidden from seeing the face of her beloved and each of their encounters occur in darkness. Nevertheless, she loves her husband and believes him to be loving and good. From Orual's perspective, there simply was no palace and the god was not good and loving but evil (if he existed at all). Orual believed that the god commanded Psyche not to look at him because he wanted to hide his true, monstrous identity from Psyche. Orual eventually manipulates Psyche into lighting the room in order to see the face of her beloved. In the end, Psyche does not question her beloved's character. In fact, she is ashamed to disobey him

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (New York: Harcourt, 1984).

but, at the demand of her sister, she lights her husband's face and disobeys his command as an expression of love for her sister. Thus, Psyche is cast out of the palace and forced to wander in exile. Orual had only heard the command second-hand from Psyche. She questions the command of her sister's beloved because it seemed irrational. She thought that only a thief or monster would refuse to be seen in light, and she believed that their supposed palace was simply a figment of Psyche's imagination.

Orual later became a great queen of her land and she was well loved by her servants and friends, but she never married or had children of her own. It is at this point that she comes to write the story about her love of Psyche and how the gods had taken her away. After completing her initial complaint against the gods for taking her beloved sister (Book I), the second book commences as Orual reconsiders her complaint against the gods. In issuing the written complaint itself and by means of a chance encounter with one of her subjects where the subject suggests that her love of both her sister and her most loyal servant was really possessive and selfish, Orual discovers that her love of Psyche was neither genuine nor pure. In fact, she sees that she embodies each of the characteristics mentioned in her complaint. She issued her complaint against the gods because she desired to be in their place. She desired to be the ultimate object of Psyche's love. Psyche was hers alone – not to be shared with another. This realization allowed Orual to see herself as she truly was – it allowed her to see others face to face because she now had a face. It allowed her to, in fact, love others rather than simply being the object of love for others.

There are a number of themes that are worthy of development in the text – the nature of love, the role of narrative and story in identity formation, etc. – but it also exemplifies the complex relationship between the claims of authority and the claims of reason and the limits of

aesthetic and philosophical evaluation. It suggests that to question the claims of authority by means of external criteria undermines what is important about claims of authority in the first place. To put authority to an objective, publicly accessible test undermines the meaning and value of claims based on authority.

Kierkegaard's Concept of Authority

The reason putting authority to the test undermines the claim of authority is because all such claims are necessarily personal; that is, they depend on the particularities of one's relation with the authority figure. They are not impersonal injunctions that are valid independently of a person's identity or relations to others. MacIntyre describes the difference as follows:

[Suppose] I say, 'Do so-and-so'. The person addressed replies, 'Why should I do so-and-so?' I reply, 'Because I wish it.' Here I have given the person addressed no reason to do what I command or request unless he or she independently possesses some particular reason for paying regard to my wishes. If I am your superior officer – in the police, say, or the army – or otherwise have power or authority over you, or if you love me or fear me or want something from me, then by saying 'Because I wish it' I have given *you* a reason, although not perhaps a sufficient reason, for doing what it is that I enjoin. Notice that in this type of case whether my utterance gives you a reason or not depends on certain characteristics possessed at the time of hearing or otherwise learning of the utterance by you.²

MacIntyre describes the difference in order to illustrate the category mistake that emotivists make by holding that moral claims are simply expressions of personal preference. He does not, however, describe the relationship between the claims of authority and the claims of reason. In what follows, I offer a defense and reconstruction of the suggestion that Lewis makes at the end of *Till We Have Faces*. That is, I will defend Lewis's idea that requiring that the claims of authority be subjected to impersonal philosophical or aesthetic scrutiny eliminates any place for

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 9.

claims of authority, and I will show how this suggestion is instructive for understanding the liturgical and confessional turn among certain evangelicals.

This sort of claim is not unique to Lewis or the novel. Its history goes back to Tertullian's rhetorical question about Jerusalem and Athens, and one of the most voracious defenses of this position is found in Kierkegaard's "The Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle." In this work, Kierkegaard claims that the role of authority (exemplified in the Apostle) should be kept separate from aesthetic or philosophical evaluation (exemplified in the Genius). He argues that genius is evaluated only aesthetically or philosophically, and the work of the genius lives or dies based on these characteristics alone. The criteria for evaluating the genius's position are impersonal and unrelated to the person who presented the position. The apostle, however, presents the truth on the basis of God's authority. The reason why the claim is to be believed is precisely because it is from God. Such authority forbids aesthetic or philosophical evaluation, because to apply these categories to the claims of the Apostle suggest that the Apostle's position is presented on the basis of either its literary, stylistic, or philosophical merits. To subject the claims of authority to these other evaluative standards commits a category mistake, since the claims of authority are inherently personal. That is, they depend on the person making the claim and his or her relation to the subject to whom the claim is made. But since the criteria mentioned above do not depend on any personal relationship between the speaker and the subject, any rational or properly trained person is able to understand and evaluate the claims being made.³

Kierkegaard applies his understanding of authority to a number of his contemporaries' sermons and theological works. He mentions one sermon in particular where the preacher claims

³ This paragraph is my summary of the basic content of the essay entitled "The Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle" written by Kierkegaard pseudonymously under the name of H.H.

that the passage in John 8:47-51, which reads in part ‘Whoever keeps [Christ’s] word will not see death’, solves three great riddles which have “racked [people’s] brains since time immemorial.”⁴ The preacher is claiming that Jesus’ statement is itself a solution to a philosophical problem. The mistake this minister makes is that he changes categories. The meaning of the words, their beauty, etc. are all the same whether the words are spoken by Christ or by any other person; but these words are taken to be authoritative precisely because they are spoken by the God-man. As Kierkegaard claims, however, a statement cannot be profound based on its authority, that is based on the speaker. He explains, “If Christ is not the one who has said it, and if Christ is not the one he has said that he is, then the profundity, if the statement is in itself profound, must still be ascertainable.”⁵ This approach to scripture and to authority often rears its ugly head. One often hears of Paul’s profound argument for the existence of God (e.g., Romans 1:20), the quality of his argument with the Athenians on Mars Hill, the majesty and beauty of the scriptures as a whole (e.g., the London Baptist Confession of 1689, Book I:5), etc., etc. These claims are, according to Kierkegaard, committing a ghastly category mistake that undermines the place of authority in Christianity. In philosophical or literary terms, “Paul cannot stand comparison with either Plato or Shakespeare; as an author of beautiful metaphors, he ranks rather low; as a stylist, he is a totally unknown name – and as a tapestry maker, well, I must say that I do not know how high he can rank...”⁶

Kierkegaard even goes so far to suggest that there can be no external demonstration – none whatsoever – of a person’s authority. He claims, “If he could demonstrate it *physically*, he

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 102.

⁵ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 103.

⁶ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 94.

would simply be no apostle.”⁷ The apostle is charged with a mission of proclaiming God’s message and it is not important for the apostle to justify, give reasons for, or make the message aesthetically pleasing. Rather, the apostle is just like a messenger “sent into the city with a letter.”⁸ The paradox of the apostle is precisely that he possesses authority, but it cannot be demonstrated. To attempt a demonstration is itself a proof that one has failed to grasp the category of the apostle, the category of authority. For Kierkegaard, the problem with MacIntyre’s description of authority above is not that there are no good reasons to obey; rather, it is the fact that a person has explicitly rejected the authority simply by asking ‘Why should I do so-and-so?’.

In a culture that finds authority anathema, this approach is refreshing (at least for me), but it also produces a host of problems that appear insoluble if one takes Kierkegaard’s position to its logical extent. How should we adjudicate between competing authority claims? Through what process do I come to recognize another as having authority over me? Under what conditions should I abandon my obedience to an authority figure? Will a genuine authority ever be refused or rejected? I suspect Kierkegaard’s answer is that to even ask these questions presupposes that the figure lacks authority. A genuine authority will never be contradicted by another authority, it will always be recognized as an authority, and there are no conditions where disobedience is justified. These claims sound unsettling to contemporary ears, since it brings to mind prominent notions of the subservient wife, the obedient slave, or the compliant immigrant suggesting that all women and people of color are to appease their “superiors.” It is clear that Kierkegaard is not speaking of those relations as examples of a genuine authoritative relation.

⁷ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 105.

⁸ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 106.

Nevertheless, Kierkegaard never clearly articulates how authority will be embodied. He merely calls attention to figures who are already assumed to be authoritative (e.g., Christ, Paul or the other Apostles) and explains how we are to receive their pronouncements. In order to develop this notion in a Kierkegaardian spirit, I will appeal to the work of N.F.S. Grundtvig, who is a contemporary of Kierkegaard.

Grundtvig and Embodied Authority

For anyone who knows much about both men, this project will sound strange since they were sharply critical of the other. Grundtvig is critical of Kierkegaard because he thinks that Kierkegaard defends a one-sided, life-denying and pernicious conception of New Testament Christianity that eliminates any place in the Church for immature Christians.⁹ So how might an examination of Grundtvig enrich Kierkegaard's conception of authority? My answer is that it provides a way to embody and maintain the claims that Kierkegaard made on behalf of authority. It provides an alternative to taking the side of authority against philosophical or aesthetic evaluation.

Grundtvig accomplishes this task by emphasizing the living (and oral) word rather than the letter of the text. It is the spirit of God embodied in the people of God that possesses the living word rather than a manuscript or a set of manuscripts. Early in Grundtvig's career, he was involved in a theological dispute with H.N. Clausen, a rationalist and a professor at the University of Copenhagen. In the dispute, Grundtvig charged Clausen with adhering to a book (i.e., the Bible) rather than Christianity. According to Grundtvig, Clausen attempted to study the

⁹ Grundtvig, *Selected Writings*, 52-3, 56, 64-5, 102.

text without participating in the life of the Church. In contrast, Grundtvig took the side of the living word against the dead letter.¹⁰

The living word is found in the common life of the Church¹¹ and it is expressed in the confession of faith (e.g., the Apostle's Creed), baptism, and the holy supper.¹² These practices are expressions of the living word when the people are culturally and historically prepared to receive them in the proper fashion.¹³ This preparation consist in there being a living and active community which can be transformed by the word. Christianity only arises within a community of faith, and in cases where individualism reigns supreme and there is no common life of the people, then Christianity must create such a life.¹⁴ It must first awaken the people as a people and only then can Christianity take root.¹⁵

It is in this context that Grundtvig claims, "The death of the Danish folk-life is the spiritual death of the people. It must be remedied by the reawakening of folk-life before we can effectively speak to the people about living Christianity."¹⁶ A culture and a life of the people is not itself Christianity, but it is a necessary condition for participating in a living and active Christian faith. It is also why Grundtvig argues that any criticism or polemics (a reference to the final stage of Kierkegaard's authorship) about the Church or Christian living must "presuppose and maintain that the Christian congregation, created by the baptism of the Lord's own institution, has its peculiar source of life in this baptism and in it alone."¹⁷ That is, authoritative critiques of Christianity must be from within the Church and recognize the life of the Church.

¹⁰ Grundtvig response to Clausen is found in *Selected Writings*, 11-19.

¹¹ Grundtvig, *Selected Writings*, 18.

¹² Grundtvig, *Selected Writings*, 67.

¹³ Grundtvig, *Selected Writings*, 32.

¹⁴ Grundtvig, *Selected Writings*, 41.

¹⁵ Grundtvig, *Selected Writings*, 43.

¹⁶ Grundtvig, *Selected Writings*, 42.

¹⁷ Grundtvig, *Selected Writings*, 56.

The life of the Church secures and allows for reasoned argument and questioned but only when those arguments take place in and for the further edification of the Church.

Grundtvig locates the authority of scripture and the apostles in the person of Christ where it is maintained in and through the Church. This authority, within the context of the living congregation, is such that it will be recognized by those who see themselves within the Church. There may be disagreements between people within the Church about what Christianity demands, but these disagreements take place within the Church, a body of believers who recognize the authority of Christ, the apostles and the living word. A genuine authority will be recognized and obeyed within this specific cultural and historical context. My suggestion is that Grundtvig's account of the living word found within the community of believers provides a way to embody Kierkegaard's account of authority without positing a sharp contrast between reason and authority. This claim does not entail that the evaluative standards will be available from any standpoint; rather, they are situated within the confines of the Christian community. Authority is recognized by those who have a special relation to the source of the authority, as both Kierkegaard and MacIntyre suggested. It is not accessible from an objective, third-person point of view but only from a situated intersubjective standpoint.

Lewis's portrayal of the two most climatic scenes in *Till We Have Faces* exhibit the difference between a view of authority that pits it against reason (Kierkegaard) and one where it is embodied in a particular relationship (Grundtvig). In the first scene (pp. 99-129), Orual ascends the mountain where Psyche was sacrificed and she meets her again. Psyche is described by Orual's servant, Bardia, as a goddess and the bride of a god since she was "so brightface" that she turned Bardia's face "deadly white" (102). Psyche has been transformed such that Bardia is fearful that she may be a wraith. Orual, however, does not fear her. She explains, "But I felt no

holy fear. What? – I to fear the very Psyche whom I had carried in my arms and taught to speak and to walk?” (102). Orual walked with Psyche a distance, and after arriving at their destination Psyche brings Orual “little cool, dark berries of the Mountain, in a green leaf” and then later she brings “the wine” where Psyche held her two hands together and gave Orual “water” from a mountain trickle. These two examples illustrate a greater divide between the two sisters. Psyche sees herself at the footsteps of her grand palace, and she offers divine food and the finest wine in a beautiful cup to her sister; but Orual only sees the valley and no palace, the berries and leaf and no divine meal and plate, the hands of her sister and the water and no wine or goblet. Just as Orual was unable to see Psyche in the same way that Bardia saw her – as an object to be feared – so Orual was unable to see the world as Psyche saw it.

Orual and Psyche eventually become aware that they are not experiencing the same world. Orual is unable to see and feel the world that Psyche occupies, yet Orual become unsure about the reality of the situation. She did not know whether Psyche was pretending or simply mad, or whether she, in fact, really saw and lived in this invisible palace. Orual sees only with the enlightened mind trained from childhood from her Greek tutor. She was unable to see the palace and Psyche as she truly was. Orual’s distrust is the flip-side of Kierkegaard’s recovery of authority. Both Kierkegaard and Orual see religious authority and reason as antipodes. Kierkegaard privileges genuine authority over philosophical or aesthetic evaluation, but Orual privileges her own reason over the divine authority communicated to her. She is even aware that there are facets of her experience that cannot be reconciled with her understanding of the situation (for example, Psyche looks fit and well nourished, and if she were living on berries and water with no shelter in the mountains, she would not look this way), but she rejects the possibility because she is blinded by her rationality.

In the second scene, the reader discovers why it was that Orual was unable to see Psyche and the divine palace as they truly were. Orual informs the reader that she wrote the story of her life as a complaint against the gods. She indicts them for being unjust, and she questions whether the gods could defend themselves against her accusations. The story of her life is presented as a defeasible case against the gods. This material constitutes the first book of the novel, and the second book of the novel tells the story of how Orual's complaint against the gods ends up revealing Orual's true character which precluded her from experiencing and relating to the world and the gods rightly. In a dream, she is brought before the judge to issue her complaints against the gods. Her complaint in the dream, just as it was in the first book, revolves around her encounter with Psyche on the mountain. This time, however, Orual's complaint makes explicit why it was that she thought the gods were unjust.

Those we love the best... [are] stolen away by this everlasting calling, calling, calling, calling of the gods. Taken where we can't follow. It would be far better for us if you were foul and ravening. We'd rather you drank their blood than stole their hearts. We'd rather they were ours and dead than yours and made immortal. But to steal her love from me, to make her see things I couldn't see... oh, you'll say (you've been whispering it to me these forty years) that I'd signs enough her palace was real, could have known the truth if I'd wanted. But how could I want to know it? Tell me that. The girl was mine... There's no room for you and us in the same world. You're a tree in whose shadow we can't thrive. We want to be our own. I was my own and Psyche was mine... Oh, you'll say you took her away into bliss and joy such as I could never have given her, and I ought to have been glad of it for her sake. Why? What should I care for some horrible, new happiness which I hadn't given her and which separated her from me? Do you think I wanted her to be happy, that way? It would have been better if I'd seen the Brute tear her in pieces before my eyes. (290-292)

Upon making her complaint with her character and assumptions made explicit, Orual become profoundly aware of the answer to her complaint. Orual's "freedom" from the gods was a freedom to control others and her "rational" skepticism was the result of a depraved heart. The reason she couldn't see the gods, the palace, or even Psyche as she truly was was because she

was not ready for it. At the end of the second book, she understood why “the gods do not speak openly” (294). It is because we cannot understand what they are saying or see it rightly until we are prepared. They cannot “meet us face to face till we have faces” (294).

Liturgy, Authority, and the Church

The Church would do well if had a face so that it could see face to face.¹⁸ Grundtvig believed the Church must be culturally and historically prepared before God will meet us face to face. Just as Orual only understood her relation to the gods and Psyche when she rightly understood herself, so the Church must learn to see itself as it is if it is to relate properly to God and others. It must see God’s providential hand in the development of its own tradition as an authority, just as Orual saw providence in the process of making her complaint. In short, Christian authority can only be an authority in a particular location – it depends on a particular relation between those subject to the authority and the authority itself. In Book I, Orual lacks this relation to the gods and so she is unaware of their authority in relation to her, but in Book II, Orual acquires this special relation to the gods by means of issuing her complaint against the gods. This process enacts the special relation necessary for a proper relation to authority.

All too often in contemporary life and evangelical culture, religious authority is understood in the ways that Kierkegaard (or Orual in Book I) treated it. It is taken for granted that religious authority and reason are binary opposites. Scott Moore has said, “[T]here is no more commonly accepted presupposition (amounting to dogma in many places) than the self-

¹⁸ I use the term ‘Church’ to denote the universal Church and I use the term ‘church’ to denote a particular body of believers.

evident observations that smart people outgrow God.”¹⁹ Smart people become disenchanted with God and religious authority.

Within evangelical culture, there are two basic historical trajectories that operate through this binary. First, many Christians, particularly Baptists and evangelicals, embrace some form of anti-intellectualism in order to preserve some semblance of religious authority.²⁰ In response to the anti-intellectual character of the first type of Christians, a second group takes a fundamentally different approach. In the passage below, Robert Webber described his own experience as a member of the reaction against anti-intellectualism:

I didn't know it at the time, but I was being swept away into evangelical rationalism, into a proof-texting Christianity, into a Christianity based on scientific inquiry. Christianity was no longer a power to be experienced but a system to be defended. I had left the impenetrable forest and entered the technological city... My experience was simply this: the more certain I became of my ability to defend God's existence and explain his character, the less real he seemed to me... The reservoir of God's presence in my life was running low. But forget that. It really didn't matter. I had the answers. And, after all, I had been taught that the answers were what made the difference... I had heard an evangelical leader say, "I believe in Christianity because it is the most rational explanation of the universe. Show me another system more rational and I'll embrace that and give up my Christian faith." Of course, that person always went on to say that he had studied all the religio[ns] and philosophies of the world, and that he believed there wasn't any view more rational than the Christian faith... I also thought I could rationally defend the Scripture as God's mind written and then proceed to systematize the truth of Scripture...²¹

Webber makes this point in order to show how the apologetical approach of many evangelicals erodes the life and mystery of Christianity from worship and Christian practice. Webber's claim

¹⁹ Scott Moore, "The Predicament and the Promise for Young Baptist Scholars," *The Scholarly Vocation and the Baptist Academy* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008).

²⁰ For a critique of this approach, see Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

²¹ Robert Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals Are Attracted to the Liturgical Church*, (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1985), 24-26.

is that evangelicals, particularly those who find themselves among the apologists and Christian leaders mentioned above, are attracted to liturgical practices because it renews Christian life and practices by allowing for mystery and enchantment with God.

Webber's book was one of the first to highlight a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly prominent where the children of evangelicals become increasingly attracted to liturgical practices (a worship service where corporate and responsive prayers are offered, historic creeds, i.e., the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, are expressed corporately, longer Biblical passages from the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Gospels are read, the Eucharist is practiced more frequently in a more formal way, etc.)²² This phenomenon is found not only when these children convert to Catholicism, Orthodoxy, or a more liturgical Protestant tradition, but these practices are also developing within evangelical Churches as well. A 2007 *U.S. News and World Report* article documented this trend within each of these traditions.²³

The attraction of liturgical practices, I suggest, is at least partially because it eludes the binary of authority and reason. The confession of faith and the liturgy provide a thick confessional identity where the Christian life is embodied and practiced. It establishes a special relation between the community of the faithful who are subject to the authority and the authority itself. It produces a community of faith that contains within it Grundtvig's living word, but it also disciplines and forms its participants in ways that make the living word an authority for believers within these traditions.

²² Webber has spent much of his career making a theological and sociological case for recovering liturgy. His *The Young Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002) and his *Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999) describe his case for it. There was also a 2007 conference at Wheaton College dedicated to the theme and many of the essays presented there were published under the title: *Ancient Faith for the Church's Future*, ed. Mark Husbands and Jeffrey P. Greenman (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2008).

²³ Jay Tolson, "A Return To Tradition: A New Interest In Old Ways Takes Root In Catholicism And Many Other Faiths" *U.S. News and World Report*, 12- 13-2007.

James K.A. Smith, in his books *Who's Afraid of Post-Modernism?* and *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, makes a similar argument for “thick” confessional identities.²⁴ He argues that criticizing modernism and taking “post-modernism” seriously (e.g., an account of the situated character of knowledge, a rejection of meta-narratives, and a Christian appropriation of Foucauldian “power” for the sake of Christian disciple formation) suggests that we need to restore “our identity as the ‘peculiar people’ who make up the body of Christ and seek to retrieve the strange ways and ancient practices of the communion of saints in order to re-form who we are.”²⁵ He is critical of a “thin” confession, an “ecumenicalism” that reduces the implicit or explicit Christian “confession” into mere ethical or justice concerns, and he embraces the particularity expressed in a “thick” confession much like Grundtvig’s account of the living word insofar as the confession of faith connects the community of faith to historic Christianity while simultaneously establishing boundaries for the community.²⁶

This way of understanding the relation between the authority of God and his representatives and the community of faith enacts the particular and idiosyncratic relation that establishes a relation of authority between God and his people. The reasonableness of Christianity and the Christian tradition is not something that can be understood from an objective third-person point of view. Rather, it is only accessible for the initiated one who participates in the practices and life of the Church. Likewise, the authority of God embodied in the living word is not something that is laid over the top of Church beliefs or practices in order to motivate participants. Rather, the authority is found throughout the life, beliefs and practices of the

²⁴ James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004) and James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Post-Modernism?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006)/

²⁵ Smith, *Who's Afraid of Post-Modernism?*, 116.

²⁶ Smith, *Who's Afraid of Post-Modernism?*, 116-117.

community of believers. The participants in the community see the Church as authoritative because of the special relationship that has developed over time. In short, authority and reason are shot through the entire life of the Church – in its doctrine, its ethics, its scriptures and its practices.

There are three major objections to this approach to Christian authority: (1) Christians do not need to have authority embodied in a Church tradition. One only needs scripture itself and the illumination provided to believers by means of the Holy Spirit. (2) Even if it were a good idea to understand Christian authority in terms of an embodied Church tradition, there is no effective way to determine which “thick confession” or Church tradition to use as a community seeks to develop this special authoritative relation. (3) Even if there are satisfactory answers to (1) and (2), it is still the case that the particularity of the relationship described above is such that it may limit the diversity and/or freedom of the participants as it promotes sameness in the intellectual, moral and cultural life of the community. This reason alone is sufficient to be concerned about developing this sort of “thick confession.”

The first objection depends on the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. The view is that scripture alone is the sole Christian authority, and the Holy Spirit guides and directs believers as they interpret and represent the Bible. Does the account I am proposing of the relation between Christian authority and critical evaluation undermine the doctrine of *sola scriptura*? The answer, I am certain, depends on how one understands the doctrine. If it follows from one’s view of the doctrine that individual Christians not only are justified in reading, understanding, and interpreting scripture, but also that every single interpretation by a Christian is considered equally true, then it is the case that the account I am proposing undermines the doctrine. Likewise, if it follows from one’s view that the historic (ancient and recent) narratives of

Christian beliefs, thoughts, and practices are irrelevant and unimportant in our present understanding of the text, then my account undermines the doctrine. That is, some interpretations of scripture are better than others and one way of (partially) adjudicating between competing interpretations is to examine and consider the testimony of the Church on the relevant subject.

As Grundtvig maintains, the scripture in *sola scriptura* is a living word embodied in the Church. The Church is known by its administration of the Lord's supper and baptism and by its confession of faith (for Grundtvig, the Apostles' Creed). The fundamental difference between the two approaches is that the one sees interpretation as an *individual* process where the community of faith plays no fundamental role whereas the other sees interpretation as a *communal* process where the individual believer subordinates his or her own interpretation to the Christian community. If one adopts the former approach, then there is no process for believers to adjudicate and decide between competing interpretations of scripture.²⁷ The implication is that this approach reinforces the binary opposition of authority and rational evaluation.

If one adopts the latter view, however, it does not follow that Christian community is a higher authority than the scripture, nor does it follow that private interpretation is necessarily problematic. Rather, it is that scripture is the highest authority within the Church (not against the Church) and private – that is, one's own – interpretation of scripture needs to take place within a Christian community.²⁸ Furthermore, it is often the case that those who want to place the scripture against the Church as an authority do so by asserting a private interpretation that allows the individual to escape the authority of both. This strategy reinforces the binary opposition

²⁷ I have not asserted any particular way of adjudicating between competing interpretations, but it is, at least, possible in principle.

²⁸ For a defense of this position, see Chapters 8 and 9 of Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), 237-284.

described above and it is exemplified most clearly in the nineteenth century rationalists (e.g., the Biblical scholar Clausen who Grundtvig debated) who pit the (critically interpreted) Bible against the Church in order to minimize the supernatural in both.

The second objection is that there is no way to determine which “thick confession” to adopt. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was a proliferation of confessional standards (e.g, the Augsburg Confession, the Westminster Confession, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, the Scottish Confession, the London Baptist Confession, the Thirty-nine articles, etc., etc.) and these confessions not only tied the confessional body to the historic Christian Church but also created boundaries around it. How can we determine which confession our particular group adhere to, or how can we determine if and/or when we should create a new confession which ties our Christian community to the historic Church and also bounds it in a particular way?

So long as we understand the confession of faith as simply a list of beliefs, then the objection has a great deal of force. That is, since developing and/or adhering to a confession is a really challenging task that often splinters communities of faith, there is a strong practical reason to avoid doing so. My response to this objection is not that Christians should adopt the one true confession of faith. Rather, my response is that lacking a thick confession precludes the very possibility of Christian community both among those who have adopted the confession and between communities who adhere to another confession. It not only weakens the felt connection between one’s own tradition and historic Christianity, but it also precludes the creation of boundaries of belief and practice for those within the tradition. The result is that the group is both unable and unwilling to direct, form and discipline its participants in any *intentional* way, and if the boundaries and values of the group are not considered and developed intentionally, then the

boundaries will be imposed by some external source – whether it be an economic, political or sociological source. The boundaries are, in the latter case, taken as a given natural or social fact rather than a product of communal deliberation and decision.²⁹ In such a case, there may or may not be a community (depending on the way the boundary is imposed), but it will not be a *Christian* community. A thick confession can create a situation where the participants are shaped and formed within the Christian tradition in a way that counteracts the logic of dominant economic or sociological forces. It promotes the consideration and evaluation of the demand of Christ in all arenas of the Christian’s life rather than merely “spiritual” or “religious” concerns.

My response to the second objection has, thus far, addressed the issue from the standpoint of an insider relative to the confession. How might relations between different confessional communities function? And how might it look for the outsider to all confessional communities? These are two separate issues, but my response to both is similar. The experience of the outsider (both inside and outside of other confessional communities) with and in the community of faith can be positive and rewarding when the thick confession is well articulated. It can, for example, allow the outsider to participate in the worship experience as a guest much like attending class in or visiting a foreign country. For example, when I am in Denmark, I do not expect the Danes to speak my language, prepare and eat American foods, etc. I expect them to live and act like Danes.³⁰ At times, the experience will be uncomfortable and challenging for me, but it can also be a positive and rewarding experience. I can learn about how other people live and I may even adopt certain elements that I appreciate from them. In much the same way, I believe the

²⁹ MacIntyre makes a similar argument when he discusses the Rich Aesthete, the Manager, and the Therapists as the characters who embody emotivist views. He argues that all three figures act as if ends are outside their control and that they are only concerned with finding the most effective means to accomplish the ends set by external sources. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 30-31.

³⁰ I have adapted this illustration from one James K.A. Smith uses.

particularities expressed in a confessional community can enrich the common life of all believers – both those within the particular confessional tradition and those outside of it. An outsider can be welcomed into a confessional community as a guest, and this experience allows the individual to participate in the community.

The third objection to promoting confessional communities is that the community will be homogenous and this sameness will limit the freedom of its members and undermine the search for truth within the community. This particular objection suggests an image of the community where the members are cloistered together ignoring or rejecting any experience of the other. This image pits authority against freedom and/or intellectual inquiry. The idea is that a person is only truly engaged in intellectual inquiry when his or her views are publicly accessible from a third-person perspective such that they do not depend on any special relation the individual has to his or her particularities. The view I am defending rejects this claim. That is, intellectual and moral freedom are achieved only within a community rather than by standing against the community or tradition.

Although the image associated with this objection depicts confessional communities inaccurately, it is still a concern that must be considered and addressed. A confessional community can be homogenous in an unhealthy way, or it can actively suppress the desire to seek and know the truth. This problem is particularly acute for a number of confessional communities, but it is not unique to them. In fact, to form and discipline a people into the Church in accord with Christ demands will moderate the tendency to homogeneity by promoting hospitality and the love of neighbor and even enemy (rather than merely the “brother” or “sister”).

Conclusion

It is no accident that Lewis' portrayal of Orual's transformation precipitates a change in her relation to the gods. The narrative leading to her personal and spiritual conversion had prepared her to see herself, the gods and Psyche properly. It was the particularity of her experiences that established her unique relation to the gods. That is, she saw the gods as good, just and authoritative precisely because the narrative that she told about herself in Book I and the experiences shortly thereafter re-presented the story in a new revealing light. She does not become a religious sycophant, nor does she lose her rational mind when the transformation takes place. In fact, the transformation is described as not only a moral and spiritual conversion but also as an expression of the truth of the situation. But this truth can only be found as an insider – as one who has had the sorts of experiences and life that Orual had.

The story of this transformation is writ large in the liturgical and confessional turn among the children of evangelicals, and it too embodies the authority of God in the particularities of the experiences of his people. These people, because of their special history and experiences, have been and can be formed and disciplined so that they are transformed into a people where there is necessary opposition between the authority of Christ in his Church and rational thought and deliberation. I have, of course, not addressed each of the objections and concerns about thick confessional identities, but I have presented a basic sketch of how Lewis' insight into the special character of authority can be embodied and seen in the turn to more confessional, liturgical traditions.