

CONFIDENTIAL (not for publication)

STATEMENT OF A FREE CHURCH WORKING GROUP REGARDING THE ANGLICAN AND ROMAN CATHOLIC COMMISSION ON AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH

Preface

The publication of the Statement on Authority in the Church by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission is a very important event in the process by which Christian Churches of all denominations are steadily coming closer together. The issue of authority has long been one of the most divisive; all Christians will be grateful for the constructive attempt to resolve the differences on this issue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Churches of the Anglican Communion. Conversations on the subject are going on between all the major Communion, and the Free Church Federal Council has willingly accepted the invitation of the Commission to arrange for comments to be made from a Free Church point of view.

The comments which follow are offered in the spirit of ecumenical fellowship by the group set up to deal with the matter. Of necessity they are carefully addressed to the text of the Statement, and cannot be understood without reference to that text. They are appreciative and also frank, as it is right that they should be in the climate of friendship in which Churches now speak to one another.

The Comments of the Free Church Group

We welcome this Statement as a mark of the deep desire to bring two great Christian communions into closer relations, and as the complement to the two earlier Statements on the Eucharist and Ministry. We welcome and accept the invitation through the Free Church Federal Council to act as a Free Church group to offer observations on any matters which call for comment.

We believe that the critical nature of many of these comments - some of which are doctrinal, some procedural - will not cause surprise or regret, since the issue of authority is one that has divided the Church for several centuries, and it must surely be agreed that the Statement represents only a stage, though an important one, in the long journey towards substantial harmony of doctrine on this matter. Rather it is a cause of gratitude and hope that so much in the Statement deserves the assent not only of the two communions whose representatives have produced it, but also of a wide range of Christians outside both of them.

I. We have some doubts about the method employed of expressing conclusions, which seems to be that of selecting the areas where a common mind can be expressed, and postponing for later consideration, without a clarification of the issue, those matters on which no agreement is at present in sight. This method does not reckon with the possibility that the discussion of the postponed problems may undermine the agreements reached on other matters: we give an example of this danger later in this document (see Paragraph XV).

II. The Preface rightly acknowledges that there 'is much in the Statement, which presents the ideal of the Church as willed by

Christ', while 'history shows how the Church has often failed to achieve this ideal'. This distinction between the ideal and the actual is very welcome. But its recognition does not prevent the Commission from slipping into the identification of the norm with what has actually happened. The problems which arise from this underlie many of our later comments. This identification begins in Paragraph 8, continues in Paragraph 9 and becomes constant from Paragraph 10 onwards. The possibility that developments in Church History which have become permanent in large parts of the Church may be contrary to the will of God, or at least not in complete harmony with it, seems to be forgotten. It seems to be assumed, without argument, that changes introduced at and since the Reformation, including those in the Church of England, and claimed by their authors to be commended by Scripture, were contrary to the will of God and do not deserve serious consideration, although the value of many of these has been tested by several centuries of Christian experience.

III. We concur willingly with the description, under the heading of 'Christian Authority', of the Holy Spirit's work as creating the communion of men with God and with one another, and as assisting the apostolic community to transmit the life and words of Christ and to interpret his redemptive work. But we hold that the significance and authority of the New Testament, in view of its pluriformity and the many Church orders which can be justified from it, needs much fuller treatment than it here receives, lest it come once again to be treated as a mere repository of proof-texts.

IV. In the paragraphs under 'Authority in the Church' it is rightly seen that those members of the Church with special gifts of prophecy, those with a special gift of holiness, the bishops with the ordained ministry to assist them, and the whole people of God, have all a share in the Church's authority. The recognition that 'prophetic' and 'holy' persons (who may be lay people, presumably) have a role is welcome, since in our traditions lay people both preach and teach. But clearly in the many situations of ferment and sometimes turmoil that arise a process of sorting out, clarification and pronouncement becomes necessary. In our Churches, the people of God, both ordained and lay, meeting together, have the decisive role in these matters. We question the tendency of the Statement to leave final authority in the hands of the ordained, thus virtually discarding the authority of lay people at the critical moment and narrowing the history of the Church to the history of the clergy.

This tendency is modified by the words: 'the community, for its part, must respond to and assess the insights and teaching of the ordained ministers' (Paragraph 6). But it is not cancelled, since 'the bishop can require the compliance necessary to maintain faith and charity' (Paragraph 5); and 'the decisions of what has traditionally been called an "ecumenical council" are binding on the whole Church', and 'such decrees are to be received by the local churches as expressing the mind of the Church', (Paragraph 9). Ecumenical Councils have so far consisted virtually only of clergy. Paragraphs 16 and 17 indicate the same clerical, indeed episcopal, dominance in local and regional councils, and the dominance is not there criticized. The question of the reception of truth by the Church is in our view another of the matters which demand much fuller discussion.

V. It is stated in Paragraph 10 that a function of oversight of the other bishops of their regions 'was assigned to bishops of prominent sees ... This practice has continued to the present day'. This is the only form of teaching episcopate which is commended, or mentioned, anywhere in the Statement, and is clearly regarded as normative. It must be commented that the form of episcopate here

described arose and was developed according to prevailing political patterns. The possibility, therefore, that the ordering of the Church was dictated by sociological factors as much as by the Spirit of God should surely have been recognised. Christian Churches in this country and elsewhere have since the Reformation developed other forms of episcopate, no doubt in other social conditions, which they believe to be in conformity with the New Testament. Should they have been entirely left out of account, even in a Statement drawn up for two episcopal Churches, without any consideration of the question whether these forms have something to contribute to the Church's doctrine and practice of authority ?

VI. 'It is within the context of this historical development that the See of Rome eventually became the principal centre in matters concerning the Church universal' (Paragraph 12). Once again the identity of what happened with what ought to have happened is taken for granted. We are not persuaded that the political centrality of Rome which clearly influenced this development should remain for ever determinative for the government of the Church. And the omission of all reference to the claims of the Orthodox Churches of the East, here as elsewhere, is surprising. The history of the first four centuries is more complex than would appear from this Statement.

Paragraph 12 indicates that 'the importance of the bishop of Rome among his brother bishops, as explained by the analogy with the position of Peter among the apostles, was interpreted as Christ's will for his Church'. In view of the problematic character (admitted in Paragraph 24(a)) of the Scriptural texts once alleged to prove the primacy of Rome, it is now necessary to ask what the final basis of this assertion is. Presumably it is the history of the early Church, but this matter needs considerable clarification. We are told that 'the importance of the bishop of Rome was interpreted as Christ's will for his Church'. By whom ?

VII. The reminder that the Second Vatican Council placed the service and authority of the Bishop of Rome in the wider context of the shared responsibility of all the bishops is timely and welcome.

VIII. On 'Authority in Matters of Faith', the Statement could be said to assume a greater unanimity on doctrine in 'local churches' than is to be found at present within the Church of England.

IX. We doubt whether Paragraph 16 is well-founded in history. As we understand it, the part played by Councils of the Church in forming the Canon was marginal. There is no evidence that any Council handled the matter before the fourth century. The Councils of which we have record (Laodicea 363, Carthage 397) were concerned rather to prohibit the reading of non-canonical books in the liturgy than to define the limits of the Canon. References to the Canon in the early centuries appeal to tradition and usage rather than to decrees of Councils. But even if the action of Councils in identifying the Canonical Scriptures is accepted as historical, it does not establish an argument for the exercise of the conciliar mode of authority in other matters: the recognition of a scriptural norm limits rather than extends conciliar authority. Nor does the citation of Matthew 18²⁰ add any weight to the argument.

X. Paragraph 17, with its account of the growth of the authority of the See of Rome in doctrinal matters, is another clear example of the unsupported identification of the historical with the normative.

XI. In paragraph 18 reference is made to 'the interaction of bishop and people'. This phrase needs much fuller explication. Does it include the possibility that the people may tell the bishop that he is in error ? If so, by what procedure ? And if not, where is

the interaction ?

XII. In paragraph 18 it is said that 'the Church - can be described as indefectible'. Is this the Church as an ideal, or the Church as it really is ? If this point is not clear, how useful is it to say that the Church is indefectible ? The word 'indefectible' is itself obscure. Christ does not desert the Church, but the Church can desert Christ.

XIII. In Paragraph 19 we read 'When the Church meets in ecumenical council its decisions on fundamental matters of faith exclude what is erroneous'. Their authority is 'binding'. It is not clear whether this means that they contain nothing which is erroneous, or that their function is to rule out what is erroneous. In either case we are here dealing with authority in a much more stringent form than the one implied in the earlier paragraphs, where its meaning includes the willing response of the people of God, and Christians are said to have 'mutual obligations' to each other. This ambivalence in the meaning of the word indicates that a definition of authority, given at the beginning of the Statement, and maintained throughout, would have been helpful.

XIV. In Paragraph 23 the statement that 'the only see which makes any claim to universal primacy and which has exercised and still exercises such episcopate is the See of Rome', seems to imply that universal primacy is to be granted without argument to the only See which dares to claim it. This is curious reasoning. Paragraph 24 (b) says of the divine right of the successors of Peter that 'if it is understood as affirming that the universal primacy of the Bishop of Rome is part of God's design for the universal koinonia then it need not be matter for disagreement'. Is this so ? To some Christians, at least, it will seem to claim for man what belongs only to Christ. We are not convinced at the universal level by an argument which we have questioned at the regional level (in Paragraph V).

XV. Paragraph 24(c) includes the doctrine of papal infallibility among difficulties still to be resolved. But it is a basic issue, and the hedging round of the doctrine by very rigorous conditions laid down at the First and Second Vatican Councils does not affect that fact. According to Vatican II, the Pope can still speak infallibly on his own. If further discussions showed that no doctrine of the infallibility of the Pope was acceptable to Anglicans (as is quite possible), the whole basis of the consensus reached by the Commission could well be endangered. This is the example which we had in mind when we pointed out the defects of the Commission's procedure in our first comment.

XVI. In Paragraph 24(d) it is suggested that the anxiety of Anglicans (which is shared, of course, by others) that 'the universal immediate jurisdiction' of the Pope is liable to 'illegitimate or uncontrolled use' can be allayed by the knowledge that 'the Roman Catholic Church is now seeking to replace the juridical outlook of the nineteenth century by a more pastoral understanding of the authority of the Church'. But such anxiety cannot be entirely dispelled just by a change of understanding while the Curia and the whole apparatus of ecclesiastical administration still surround the Pope; for it is the lesson of theology, history and experience that such a concentration of power inhibits the growth of a pastoral spirit, except in the rare cases of popes like John XXIII.

We draw attention to the chapter on 'The Teaching Authority of the Church' in 'The Presence of Christ in Church and World', issued by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, and to the forthcoming Statement on Authority of the Roman Catholic - World Methodist Council Commission.

We recognise the importance at this stage of bilateral conversations on fundamental issues, and we hope that the various Statements will form part of the preparation for a truly ecumenical treatment of authority in the future. We welcome therefore the establishment of the Forum on Bi-lateral Conversations set up by World Confessional Families and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. We hope that its work will be reflected and continued in Regional and national conversations.

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