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Sum Alan Clark

NOTE FOR THE OXFORD MEETING

CHURCH AND AUTHORITY

1. From the beginning of the Church the confession of Christ as Lord has been the heart of the Christian faith. Throughout the Church's history, whether recognised or not, this has been at the root of all its trials and triumphs. This Lordship of Christ is fundamental because God exalted him at the resurrection by the Holy Spirit, giving him all authority in heaven and on earth. As Lord of the Church he bestows the gift of the Holy Spirit to create a fellowship of men with God and with one another. To bring this fellowship to perfection is God's eternal purpose and the Church exists to serve its achievement.
2. Through the reception of the Spirit the apostolic community came to recognise in the words and deeds of Jesus the saving activity of God. For them the proclamation of the good news of salvation was to preach Jesus, through whom God had spoken finally to men. Inspired by the Holy Spirit they transmitted what they had heard and seen of the life and words of Jesus, together with their interpretation of his redemptive work. Consequently the inspired documents in which this is recorded were accepted by the primitive Church as the authentic foundation of the faith. Through the written words the authority of the Word of God is conveyed. The Christian community, entrusted with these documents, is enabled by the Holy Spirit both to comprehend

the gospel and to embody it in daily living. It has therefore an innate capacity for self-assessment and the ability to speak authoritatively to the world in the name of Christ. Insofar as it is faithful to Christ in accordance with the written word received from the apostolic community, it fulfils authentically its vocation to be the servant of the Lord. This shared commitment and belief create a common mind in determining how the gospel should be interpreted and obeyed today. By reference to this common faith each individual is helped to discover the truth of his own belief.

3. To nurture this community and to strengthen this common faith the Lord calls for servicing ministries, for which the Spirit dispenses a variety of gifts. Amongst these ministries that of oversight has a special responsibility for sustaining the community and leading it towards the ultimate goal. Because the ordained minister has been called and commissioned by Christ for this ministry, he is entrusted with the authority to exercise it in the name of Christ, thereby disclosing Christ's authority within the community. It is his responsibility to discern what is conducive to the continuity and growth of the community. All this is dependent upon his openness to the truth of the gospel as lived by the whole community. Because they recognise his vocation and commission, they accept

him as a true minister of the grace of Christ. Nevertheless the full effectiveness of his ministry depends upon his own faithfulness to the gospel.

4. By the convergence and complementarity of these various means the Holy Spirit keeps the Church under the Lordship of Christ. Because the limitations and sinfulness of human nature are still evident in all Christians, the human authorities in the Church never adequately reflect Christ's authority. The awareness of this inadequacy involves a continual summons to reform. In fulfilling his promise that his Church will persevere to the end, Christ takes account of this human weakness, sometimes even making it serve his own purposes.

Poringland  
14th December, 1974