

The ARCIC Agreed Statement on Authority, Venice, 1977

The Agreed Statement on Authority: An Anglican note

Like, I imagine, all Anglicans of good will, I warmly welcome this report, and regard it as a milestone in the journey towards unity between our two communions. I applaud the courage of those who have produced it and pray for God's blessing on their continuing labours.

That which may strike the outside public as most startling about it, the Anglican willingness to accept a form of papal primacy, is not in fact something new. It goes no farther than the last Lambeth Conference went in 1968, and represents what many responsible Anglicans have held for the past hundred and fifty years. I am also very glad to see the wise remarks in para. 15 about the necessity of restating doctrines. I regard this as a very hopeful suggestion for the course of future discussion about the doctrines on which we appear to differ. I note with interest that the sentence in para. 9, 'decisions are authoritative when they express the common faith and mind of the Church', is illuminated by the suggestion in para. 16: 'This process [i.e. 'the recognition and reception of conciliar definitions'] is often gradual'. I suspect that this means in effect that the Church can only recognize whether a definition is ecumenical and binding *ex post facto*. The criterion is in fact the historical judgement as to whether any given definition has been accepted by the Church in the course of subsequent history. I regard this as the only feasible criterion. (1) (2) (3) ?

There are two features of the Agreed Statement which I cannot accept, and with which, I conjecture, Anglicans will experience considerable difficulty. The first occurs in para. 19: 'When the Church meets in ecumenical council its decisions on fundamental matters of faith exclude what is erroneous'. I do not think God has given us any such guarantee, although I accept what the statement says about the indefectibility of the Church. And secondly, I do not think that most Anglicans will ever be persuaded to accept the concept of infallibility (para. 24c), no matter how reasonably and moderately it be presented. The whole concept has too much inherent ambiguity to be capable of being satisfactorily defined. but (1) (2)

(3) A final remark is this: perhaps it is exorbitant to expect a statement which already marks so admirable an advance to do more than it has, but I would have liked clearer guidance on the relation of the ordained ministry to the Church as a whole. In particular I would like to see the question discussed, is the ordained ministry responsible to the Church as a whole, or is it responsible only to God in Christ, without the intervention of the rest of the Church? But, as most Anglicans have never even considered this question, I do not think I have any right to complain that it has not yet come up.

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