

COMMENT FROM THE DOCTRINAL COMMISSION OF THE CHURCH IN WALES  
ON AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH, JUNE 1977

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(1) The work of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission has led to three agreed statements on matters of outstanding significance in the relationship of the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church. The Doctrinal Commission of the Church in Wales has already reported favourably on the two earlier agreed statements, 'The Eucharist' and 'Ministry and Ordination'. We report now on the third agreed statement, 'Authority in the Church'.

(2) Before entering upon any questions of detail, it must be said clearly that this commission welcomes the third agreed statement as an eirenic contribution to the clarification of the issues which have divided the churches for so long. Both communions are deeply indebted to the ARCIC for its new thinking, both on the nature of authority in the Church and on the manner of its exercise.

(3) The Preface makes two points of a preliminary nature: (a) The reader must be aware of a distinction between the nature and exercise of authority in the ideal and the nature and exercise of authority in an actual historical situation. (b) Both communions have much to learn from one another as they seek to translate the ideal into the actual. In other words, the coming together of the two communions would be of benefit to both.

(4) In the statement itself the exposition develops logically from the supreme authority of Christ, through the reflection of that authority in the written Word and the lives of Christians, to the authority that rightly belongs to the Church corporately and can be exercised pastorally by the ordained ministry. It proceeds then to explore the authority of general councils in matters of faith and discipline; and considers the authority of primatial sees as they serve the koinonia of the whole Church and promote its mission in the world. It is clearly stated that "primacy and conciliarity are complementary elements of episcopate" (para. 22) Only then, in the light of this understanding is attention given to those specific areas in which the two communions have been, and still are, deeply divided.

(5) With the main thrust of the treatment, to the end of section V, we believe there should be wide agreement; though it is very important, even in reading this less controversial part of the statement, to remember the distinction between the ideal of the Church as willed by Christ and the historical reality of the Church which has so often fallen short of this ideal in the past and still does so today. The final section of the statement considers four specific issues which have divided Canterbury and Rome, attempting in each case to assess the possibilities for the future.

(6) Regarding the Roman primacy, we are glad to note that "many Roman Catholic scholars do not now feel it necessary to stand by the former exegesis of the (Petrine) texts in every respect" (24a).

(7) The recognition that the language of 'divine right', with reference to the successor of Peter, "has no clear interpretation in modern Roman Catholic theology" seems to prepare the way for a new openness in the relations of the two communions. (24b).

(8) The question of papal infallibility does not appear to have been resolved in any degree. As a technical term 'infallibility' is unfortunate, even though its limits are clearly set out. Mercifully there are few utterances for which the claim to infallibility is made; yet the real offence lies in the presumption that a man should claim to be "preserved from error" even when speaking ex cathedra. (24c).

(9) With regard to the claim to 'universal immediate jurisdiction' Anglicans still have legitimate grounds for anxiety, justified not only by memories of the past but also by present issues in the Roman Church (e.g. the relationship between papal primacy and episcopal collegiality, reflected in ad limina visits, centralised administration, etc.) Unfortunately, the claim to universal immediate jurisdiction can be, and perhaps sometimes is, a mere defence of power. A hopeful sign is that "The Roman Catholic Church is today seeking to replace the juridical outlook of the nineteenth century by a more pastoral understanding of authority in the Church." (24d).

(10) In considering the prospects for the future relation of our two communions, this agreed statement on Authority must be read in the context of the former statements on the Eucharist and the Ministry respectively. It then becomes clear that the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church are not only agreed on a wide range of fundamental doctrines and practices but also have begun to converge more closely as differences are studied together. The agreed statement on Authority closes by asking the respective church leaders whether they think the three ARCIC statements express "a unity at the level of faith which not only justifies but requires action to bring about a closer sharing between our two communions in life, worship, and mission" (para.26)

We would answer this question with a definite Yes. We do not wish to say that the difficulties posed by papal infallibility and universal immediate jurisdiction are in any way unimportant. To claim that would be untrue. What we do wish to say is that these difficulties would only be magnified if we concentrated attention on them instead of devoting our energy and goodwill to achieving a much closer relationship than at present between the Church of Rome and ourselves. It therefore seems fitting that we should conclude our report by quoting words used by Bishop Michael Ramsey, who himself did so much to further Anglican-Roman relations, and out of whose discussions with Pope Paul ARCIC came into being.

"Primacy should depend upon and express the organic authority of the Body; and the discovery of its precise functions will come not by discussion of the Petrine claims in isolation but by the recovery everywhere of the Body's organic life, with its bishops, presbyters and people. In this Body, Peter will find his due place, and ultimate reunion is hastened not by the pursuit of the 'Papal controversy' but by the quiet growth of the organic life of every part of Christendom." (A.M. Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*, p.228).