

Rev. C.Hill,
C.F.R., London.

ARCIG 227
Latimer House
131 Banbury Rd.,
Oxford. OX2 7AJ

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Dear Christopher,

THE AGREED STATEMENT ON AUTHORITY

You will know from John Stott's reply to your letter that he has asked me to attempt on his behalf the task of making specific suggestions about the Agreed Statement on Authority, for consideration by A.R.C.I.C. in preparing its intended response to critics of the statement. As you know, I have myself been fairly critical of A.R.C.I.C.'s earlier work (though I trust not without recognising its merits), so I do not know how welcome this intervention on my part may be, but John evidently felt that a comment from me would be more use than no comment at all. In making the comment I am not wholly dependent on my own resources, as there was a discussion on the statement, soon after publication, at a meeting of the Church of England Evangelical Council, led by the late Robin Nixon, and the statement was one of the themes of the 1977 Open Letter which I and some hundred-odd others submitted to the Anglican episcopate.

I would like to concentrate on five points:

(i) The authority of Scripture. In paragraph 2 the four sentences beginning 'Assisted by the Holy Spirit...', and in paragraph 15 the sentence beginning 'All such restatement...', seem to ascribe a certain uniqueness to the New Testament, as containing the authentic apostolic witness to the life and words of Jesus and the inspired apostolic interpretation of his redemptive work, and as being therefore the foundation and test of Christian teaching and practice. This is excellent. I have, however, two suggestions to make: (a) could one or other of these statements be expanded to include the Old Testament as well as the New? (b) could one or other of them be pointed up to say explicitly that any tradition or teaching found in the Church which conflicts with Scripture is without authority: this would put the implications beyond doubt, and would therefore be reassuring to Anglicans.

(ii) The authority of Church formularies. When the statement on the Eucharist appeared, without any discussion of the sixteenth century disagreements on the matter, it was explained by Bishop Butler that the Commission had provisionally set on one side the decrees of Trent and the 39 Articles, without, however, rejecting either their authority or their truth (Tablet, 18 Sept. 1971). The attitude of the Commission to the existing doctrinal formularies of the Roman and Anglican Churches has been left in obscurity from that day to this, and a statement on Authority is the natural place for their attitude to be expounded. Trent and the Articles cannot for ever be ignored, if they are not being rejected. Yet the footnote to paragraph 19 is the nearest the statement gets to making any reference to them.

(iii) The canon of the New Testament. Paragraph 16 states that 'Local councils held from the second century determined the limits of the New Testament, and gave to the Church a canon which has remained normative'. The paragraph goes on to infer the great authority that councils must possess, since they could decide 'so momentous a matter'. The premise of this argument is a curious historical error. It is quite true that the broad outlines of the New Testament canon were settled in the second century (see e.g. the Muratorian fragment), but no council dealt with the matter until the end of the fourth century (Laodicea and third council of Carthage). The canon was settled by usage and the judgement of theological writers, and not by councils, which came too late to influence anything but the reception of the few disputed books.

(iv) The inerrancy of General Councils. Paragraph 19 states that the decisions of ecumenical councils on the central truths of salvation 'exclude what is erroneous' and 'are by the same (Holy) Spirit protected from error'. These decisions therefore have 'binding authority', due to 'a special gift of Christ to his Church', and are 'consonant with Scripture', 'faithful to Scripture'. The paragraph finally states that 'this authority is ascribed in both our traditions to decisions of the ecumenical councils of the first centuries'. Certainly this is true of the Roman tradition, and it would be true of the Orthodox tradition (if this had been a different commission and not A.R.C.I.C!), but it is emphatically not true of the Anglican tradition, which asserts the fallibility of General Councils in Article 21 and makes faithfulness to Scripture a condition and not a premise. There seems to be a confusion here between the Anglican assertion that the ecumenical councils of the undivided Church in fact fulfilled this condition and therefore did not err, and the Roman assertion that these councils (and others since) of course fulfilled this condition because they could not err.

(v) The 'Problems'. Paragraph 24 lists the unresolved issues to which the Commission intends to give further attention. It may seem curious, but to many Anglicans this was one of the most reassuring parts of the Commission's work. After the silence of the Eucharist statement on the controversial questions to be 'resolved on the principles here established' (para. 12); and the ambiguity of the Ministry statement on the meaning of priesthood and the necessity of episcopacy (for which Elucidations has since made some amends), it was refreshing to have the frank statement of unresolved problems in the Authority statement. I would simply ask that, in its further work on these problems, the Commission will endeavour to be equally clear and frank. Especially if no substantial progress is made on the three novel dogmas discussed in sub-paragraph (c), this will need to be stated openly. Nothing would be gained by being reticent on the matter.

With prayers and good wishes for the Commission's further labours.

Yours sincerely,

Roger Beckwith.