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ARCIC 246/Scripture, Councils
& Reception/1

6. The Place of Scripture

Our documents have been criticised for failing to give an adequate account of the primary authority of Scripture, in the Church, thereby making it possible for us to treat certain historical developments as possessing an authority comparable to that of Scripture itself. Our description of 'the inspired documents... as a normative record of the authentic foundation of the faith' (Venice, para. 2) has been felt to be an inadequate statement of the truth.

The basis of our approach to Scripture is the affirmation that Christ is God's final word to man - his eternal Word made flesh. He is the culmination of the diverse ways in which God has spoken since the beginning (Hebrews 1:1-3). In him God's saving and revealing purpose is fully and definitively realised.

Moses and the prophets received and spoke the word of God in the Spirit. By the power of the same Spirit the Word of God became flesh and accomplished his ministry. At Pentecost the same Spirit was given to the disciples to enable them to recall and interpret what Jesus did and taught, and so to proclaim the Gospel in truth and power.

The person and work of Jesus Christ, preached by the apostles and set forth and interpreted in the New Testament writings, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are the primary norm for Christian faith and life. Jesus, as the Word of God, sums up in himself the whole of God's self-disclosure. The Church's essential task, therefore, in the exercise of its teaching office,

is to unfold the full extent and implications of the mystery of Christ, under the guidance of the Spirit of the risen Lord.

No endeavour of the Church to express the truth can add to the revelation already given. Moreover, since the Scriptures are the uniquely inspired witness to divine revelation, the Church's expression of that revelation must be tested by its consonance with Scripture. ~~Its teaching must always be rooted in the prophetic and apostolic writings.~~ This does not mean simply repeating the words of Scripture, but also both delving into their deeper significance and unravelling their implications for Christian belief and practice. It is impossible to do this without resorting to current language and thought. Consequently the teaching of the Church will often be expressed in words that are different from the original text of Scripture without being alien to its meaning. For instance in the ^{early} first ecumenical councils the Church spoke about 'two natures' in order to ^{expound} explain the mystery of Christ as ~~proclaimed in Scripture.~~ What was understood by the word 'nature' at this time was believed to express the content of Christian faith concerning Christ, even though the actual word is never so used in the apostolic writings. ~~It is the understanding rather than the language used which becomes part of the Christian affirmation of the faith: This is what is meant by the apostolic tradition of the Church.~~

~~Tradition may be viewed in two different ways which can be illustrated by two images. One is that of delving into the depths of the unfathomable well of Scripture with the certainty of always finding there under the guidance of the Spirit undiscovered riches and truths relevant to the needs of every generation. The second image is that of unravelling a ball of wool, endeavouring to~~

tease out the strands in the confidence that the Holy Spirit will guide us into the full truth. Because these two attitudes emphasise different facets of tradition, they are liable to clash. It is clear that the first image approximates to the Anglican view and the second to the Catholic. In either case the churches are seeking to discover the fulness of the revelation, however we may judge some of their separate conclusions. The final seal upon the truth of their propositions will be the reception by the whole Church.

7. Councils and Reception

The Commission has been said to contradict Article XXI of the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion in its affirmation that the decisions of ecumenical councils 'exclude what is erroneous'.

The Commission is very far from saying that general councils cannot err and is well aware that they 'sometimes have erred'. For example there have been councils which have claimed the title 'ecumenical' but have not been so received by the Universal Church (Ariminum and Seleucia of 359 AD). It is impossible to hold that everything decreed/^{even} at a duly-constituted general council is free of error. Article XXI in fact affirms that general councils have authority only when their judgements 'may be declared that they be taken out of Holy Scripture'. According to the argument of the Venice Statement also only those judgements of general councils are guaranteed to 'exclude what is erroneous' or are 'protected from error' which have as their content 'fundamental matters of faith', which 'formulate the central truths of salvation' and which are 'faithful to Scripture and consistent with Tradition'. 'They do not add to the truth but, although not exhaustive, they clarify the Church's understanding of it' (Venice 19).

The Commission has also been asked to say whether reception by the whole people of God is part of the process which gives authority to the decisions of ecumenical councils.

By 'reception' we mean the fact that the people of God acknowledge a decision or statement of faith because they recognise in it their own belief. They accept it because they discern a harmony between what is proposed to them and their sensus fidelium. As an example, the fathers of the Council of Chalcedon received the Letter of Pope Leo I because they recognised in it the faith of the apostles. Reception does not create truth nor legitimate the decision: it sets the seal on what the legitimate episcopus pronounced for the good of the Church. It is the final sign that the necessary conditions for an ecumenical council have been met. In this acceptance the whole Church is involved in a continuous process of discernment and response (cf. paragraph 6).

The Commission therefore avoids two extreme positions. On the one hand it rejects the view that a definition has no authority until it is accepted by the whole Church and derives its authority solely from that acceptance. Equally, the Commission denies that a council is so self-sufficient that it owes nothing to reception.