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The Church of England Evangelical Council this week calls for both clarification and revision of the Agreed Statement on the Eucharist issued at the end of the last year by the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission.

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THE RIGHT WAY FORWARD

We welcome the change of atmosphere which has taken place since the Second Vatican Council, and the setting up of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission. We believe that the right way forward in Anglican/Roman Catholic relations is precisely the kind of serious theological discussion in an atmosphere of mutual respect which the Commission has evidently succeeded in promoting.

We also welcome every attempt to get behind the entrenched positions of past controversy to fundamental principles, not least regarding the Eucharist, in order to seek fresh agreement through a common understanding of and submission to the truth of God.

THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

We question, however, whether the Commission have been wise to publish an agreed Statement on the Eucharist before reaching a consensus on the crucial subject of authority. We can guess the reasons which led them to postpone this issue. We have some sympathetic awareness of the acute dilemma in which Roman Catholics are placed by the tension between their desire for reform and their doctrine of irreformability. Nevertheless, we are convinced that no issue can be settled while this issue remains unsettled. The relevance of our conviction to the Statement on the Eucharist is already apparent in para. 1 where the Commission define their "intention ... to seek a deeper understanding of the reality of the Eucharist which is consonant with biblical teaching and with the tradition of our common inheritance". To couple biblical teaching and inherited tradition in this way, without affirming the supremacy of Scripture, is in our view to lay the wrong foundation for agreement and so to undermine in advance any super-structure which may be built upon it.

CHRIST'S UNIQUE SACRIFICE

We welcome and endorse the Commission's clear and unambiguous affirmation of the uniqueness of Christ's death on the cross as "the one, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world", which admits of no repetition or addition (para.5).

CHRIST'S OBJECTIVE PRESENCE

We also gladly recognise the Commission's desire to affirm both that Christ's historical sacrifice has contemporary power, and that Christ himself is objectively present at the Eucharist, offering himself, his body and blood, to his believing people.

A CHANGE IN THE BREAD AND WINE?

We agree that there is an element of "mystery" about the Eucharist, which is not readily amenable to verbal definition, and in particular about the precise mode of Christ's presence and the precise means by which he gives himself to his people so that they meet him, receive him and feed upon him. Nevertheless, we regard as being at the very least ambiguous and misleading the Commission's statement in the text that the bread and wine "become" Christ's body and blood (para.6), and their footnote reference to "a change in the inner reality of the elements" which is "mysterious and radical" and which (para.10) is effected "by the action of the Holy Spirit". What does this mean? We recognise that Scripture uses "realist" language in relation to the sacrament, so that the sign is referred to as the reality (e.g. "this is my body"). Thus Hugh Latimer could say that what previously was bread "now has the dignity to exhibit Christ's body". He immediately added, however, that "the change is not in the nature, but in the dignity". If this is what the Commission mean (sometimes called "trans-signification"), we can gladly accept it. But we fear that they are rather seeking to rehabilitate "transubstantiation" (though the absence of the term itself is noted and applauded), and this we must continue firmly to reject.

THE NECESSITY OF FAITH

We welcome the emphasis that when Christ's offer of himself to his people "is met by faith, a lifegiving encounter takes place" (para.8). But we think it important to state more explicitly that Christ's body and blood are received by faith (cf. John 6: 47 and 54), and not by any objective "change in the inner reality of the elements".

CHRIST'S OFFERING AND OURS

We agree that Christ's sacrifice was intended to be a pattern for his people's self-offering as well as a sacrifice for their sins. To this extent we can accept the Statement's allusion to the church's "entry into the movement of Christ's self-offering" (para.5). But we regret that our self-offering is not more clearly set forth as being itself nothing but a humble and grateful response to the unique self-offering of Christ on the cross. The relation of our sacrifice to Christ's, and so of the Eucharist to the Cross, is much too briefly treated (para.5). And the reference to the Eucharist as a "memorial" ("anamnesis") is obscure because it fails to clarify both who is reminding whom of what and in what sense a past event is thus made effective in the present.

THE STATEMENT'S OMISSIONS

We understand the Commission's decision to publish a consensus which is both limited in scope and almost entirely positive in tone. It makes us apprehensive, however, about those areas of eucharistic controversy which have been passed over, despite the claim of the Introduction that "nothing essential has been omitted". We also believe that some more negative statements (like that in para.5 "there can be no repetition ... or addition ...") are needed in order to indicate what is being denied and so clarify and safeguard what is being affirmed. The Statement deliberately concentrates on matters of doctrine; but we regret that it says nothing, for example,

about such practices as reservation, adoration and benediction, which have definite doctrinal implications.

THE NEED FOR REVISION

We very much hope that the Commission's Statement on the Eucharist is not their last word on the subject. We have asked our participants in the Church of England Evangelical Council/Roman Catholic Dialogue (a group of theologians set up in 1966) to prepare a fuller response to the Statement and to forward it to the Commission. We hope that the Commission will consider this and other submissions, and that they will undertake the dual task of clarification and revision.
