

Authority in the Church

In 1999 the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) produced its third report entitled The Gift of Authority. The report has received stinging criticism from Evangelicals in the Anglican Church and from many Roman Catholics.

‘I wouldn’t start from here’

The report assumes a degree of common ground which it claims has been established by previous ARCIC discussions. This includes, among other things, the universal primacy of the Pope. These are never discussed because they are assumed to be common ground. Therefore, anyone who takes seriously the underlying doctrine of the Church of England will find the report disingenuous, it never engages the real issues.

Falsely handling the word

Much of the report is structured around a curious application of 2 Corinthians 1:18-20. This is used to attempt to give some biblical credibility to the arguments and is said to be ‘the key to the exposition of authority in this statement’ (para 8). However, the way in which the passage is interpreted is seriously misleading. In his review of the report in *Churchman* (113/3) Professor Gerald Bray comments:

the most important thing is that its interpretation of the biblical passage is wrong, and would not be held by serious Pauline scholars, whether they are Anglicans or Catholics.

It is hardly surprising if the report arrives at spurious conclusions based on bad scholarship.

A distorted view of history

The report also fails in its treatment of history. It follows all the normal historically fallacious arguments advocating the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. It is important to remember that there is no evidence that Peter founded the Church in Rome or that he was ever Bishop of Rome. There is no evidence of Rome being other than just a large and respected Church until the fifth

century. There is certainly no justification in Scripture for any of the claims made by the papacy. ARCIC make no attempt to engage with criticism of the Roman position, it reads more like Catholic apologetic than genuine dialogue.

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Scripture and the Church.

The statements made in the report about Scripture are rather mixed. On the one hand it is clearly recognised that Scripture is the word of God and has authority because of that. This idea is clearly alien to many in the Anglican Church today who reject the authority of Scripture. However, the report then goes on to assert that Scripture is merely part of ‘Tradition’. When this is worked out it means that the Church has an authority above Scripture since the Church has a role in formulating ‘Tradition’. Again this is the classic Roman Catholic position. By putting Scripture within Tradition there is no external check on the Church and it can, and has, made all manner of erroneous claims based on its own authority which have no warrant from Scripture or indeed contradict the plain teaching of Scripture.

Infallibility

The report also argues that in certain circumstances it is possible for the Church to teach infallibly (without error). It is only explained in passing what these ‘circumstances’ might be. It is noteworthy that the report advocates infallibility for Pope and Bishops acting together. Many traditionalists in the Roman Catholic Church hold the pre-Vatican II line that infallibility rests with the Pope alone. Whichever view is taken the German Catholic Hans Küng wrote several years ago drawing attention to the cold facts of history *‘in every century the errors of the Church’s teaching office have been numerous and indisputable.’*

Whatever happened to Anglican doctrine?

It is disgraceful that the report makes no attempt to engage with the view of authority which has undergirded the Church of England since the Reformation. ARCIC does not appear to represent genuine Anglicans in any way. It is therefore important and necessary to stress again the positive biblical view of authority which the Church of England holds.

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Scripture Alone

Though there is much confusion on this issue today the formularies of the Church of England are a clear expression of the classical reformed position of Sola Scriptura (scripture alone). All the mainstream reformers held that *'only the Bible has the authority to bind the consciences of believers'*. There are lesser authorities, but none of them were *'deemed absolute, because all of them were capable of error. God alone is infallible. Fallible authorities cannot bind the conscience absolutely; that right is reserved to God and his Word alone.'* (R. C. Sproul : The

“the formularies of the Church of England are a clear expression of Sola Scriptura”

Heart of Reformed Theology p37,38). When the Church claims infallibility it is claiming authority alongside (or above) Scripture.

The sixth of the Thirty Nine Articles is the clearest statement of the Anglican view of Scripture. There it is affirmed that Scripture is a sufficient guide to the faith so that whatever is not read in it, or cannot be proved from it, cannot be demanded from any person to be believed as an article of the faith. In other words only Scripture can bind. This is a model, concise, statement of Sola Scriptura.

To err is human

Following on from this high point the Articles set out the plain fact that churches have erred (Article XIX) so that any claim to the contrary is ludicrous or deceitful. Article XX follows the logic of this through to show that the Church has authority with regards to ceremonies and controversies, yet is always under Scripture and cannot *'enforce any thing to be believed'* - except Scripture itself. Article XXI asserts that even General Councils when they are gathered together, inasmuch as they are an assembly of men, among whom not all are ruled by the Holy Spirit and the word of God, may also err. These issues are also touched on by several other Articles.

The supreme authority of Scripture also means that the Church cannot dictate how Scripture is to be interpreted. The Reformation principle of private judgment means that any believer has the right to interpret the Bible for himself or herself. Many will put up their hands in horror at this thought, but it must be understood properly. A believer is not free to separate themselves from, or set themselves above, the Christian community, they must welcome

and weigh truth from every side. However, the community, the Church, cannot bind a person's conscience because Scripture is the supreme and final authority.

The reformed Church of England

The Thirty Nine Articles are very clear in asserting that Scripture alone is the supreme authority for Christians and therefore rejecting every claim for the infallibility of the Church. This is a positive and wholesome position which is, and always has been, the mainstream Reformation view. It is to ARCIC's shame that they neither mention this view nor seek to engage with it. It is hard to see how anyone who takes seriously the fundamental teaching of the Church of England, let alone the plain facts of history, could endorse the view of authority set out in the ARCIC report.

True unity

It is all too apparent from *The Gift of Authority* that in order for there to be unity the Roman Catholic Church demands that others accept their teaching authority. This, by implication, means also accepting the full package of Roman dogma. By contrast biblical Christians seek unity with one another on the basis of our shared faith in Christ and our shared commitment to the full and final authority of God's word written. This is not a position to be ashamed of or to be abandoned but to be rejoiced in and built upon.

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