

Church of England Evangelical Council - April 1974 :  
Comments on Canterbury Statement.

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At a recent meeting of our Council, we discussed the agreed Statement on the Doctrine of the Ministry; in the light of that discussion, we would wish to submit comments to the Commission.

1. In the prevailing climate of indifferentism, we are grateful that doctrine is being taken seriously; and that agreement in faith is seen as primary in the relationship between our two communions.
2. We value the approach of seeking a common mind and common agreement as a foundation for further debate; for it is in this context that our remaining disagreements can be best understood.
3. But we would draw the Commission's attention to the following points:
  - (i) We believe it would help if the document made clearer what was intended as a factual description and what as theological principle. It is disquieting that even on as important a matter as episcopacy, Bishop Clark's commentary and Mr Charley's seem to disagree whether the document puts it in the former category or the latter. We realise that the approach to this distinction may well be different on the Anglican and the Roman Catholic side of the debate. We are also aware that the mood in both communions is at present more for consensus than definition. Yet, in the end, definition is necessary; and there is a danger that what passes for description now may be taken for definition later.
  - (ii) We do not think that the document explores what either church would understand by priesthood sufficiently; and in attempting to preserve a sacerdotal concept, it does so in terms that are not warranted by Scripture, nor necessarily relevant to a current understanding of priesthood.

As we understand it, much modern Roman Catholic thinking would hold that priesthood in the sacerdotal sense had been taken up into the divine person of Christ, and that His priesthood has been communicated to the whole church indivisibly: the ordained ministry is one gift in a common priesthood. The essential difference conferred through ordination is not a difference of degree, but it is a difference none the less, due to setting apart.

Our own understanding would be that priesthood in the mediatorial and atoning sense remained with Christ alone, and was not communicated to the church: the priesthood of Christians, whether clergy or laity (i. e. their access to God for the offering of spiritual sacrifices - sacrifices which do not atone but are acceptable because Christ has atoned) is dependant on Christ's priesthood but not the same ; moreover, it is not more closely

linked with the sacrament of holy communion than with any other appointed act of Christian worship or conduct, despite what para. 13 says to the contrary. Nevertheless the idea of ordained ministry as one gift in a common priesthood merits further exploration.

4 We would like to draw attention to some particular phrases in the statement.

(i) In para. 1, a phrase is repeated from the first statement; it was inserted without explanation then, and is repeated without explanation now. The phrase is - 'a deeper understanding of ministry which is consonant with Biblical teaching and with the traditions of our common inheritance'. The implication apparently is that Scripture and pre-Reformation tradition are of common authority.

The relationship between Scripture and Tradition has been explored in the book 'Growing into Union': but a bald statement without explanation is open to misinterpretation.

(ii) The word 'memorial' in paras 12 and 13 is repeated from the earlier statement on the Eucharist, again without adequate explanation. Its use in the earlier document was much criticised, and must not be taken as a fixed point.

(iii) We are not happy with other phrases in para. 13. The minister does not stand in sacramental relationship to what Christ did on the Cross - but to what Christ did at the supper. Christ's offering of His sacrifice was exclusively His act alone.

Nor are we clear that a phrase which suggests that ordained ministry belongs to 'another realm of the gifts of the Spirit' than 'the common priesthood' is theologically accurate.

(iv) In para 16 the reference to historical continuity lays too institutional an emphasis, when it is spiritual and doctrinal continuity that is most significant. The ordination of a bishop by his fellow bishops does not 'ensure' such continuity automatically.

(v) Para 17 refers to a consensus of the commission 'on essential matters', it would help if what is meant by 'essential' was explained. It is intended to suggest consensus on all or only some essential matters?

5. We recognise that it was not necessarily appropriate for the Commission to deal with Apostolicae Curae in this statement, and that it might be better dealt with under the question of authority, or after that question has been tackled.

But we hope that the Commission will address itself to this question as soon as it can, and also other crucial matters of controversy outside the scope of its first three statements, such as soteriology and Mariology.

6. We would ask that within the context of any definite agreement, the Commission might be prepared in charity to set out disagreements also, and will not demur from doing so clearly. We believe that this is in the interest of true ecumenical progress.

In these days of syncretism, there might also be a place for repudiations; some statement of what the two communions do not believe in the matters that have been under discussion, especially at points where their traditional or reputed views are now seen to be untenable.

7. We appreciated the presence of the Revd. Michael Richards in our discussion - and while he would not associate himself with much of our comment, he greatly helped us in our understanding of the situation. He would, we believe, share our concern on two particular matters: -
- (i) That the document does not explore the question of priesthood sufficiently, and needs to do so in the light of contemporary understanding.
- (ii) That there would be some real value for ecumenical discussion in a charitable statement of those matters on which we still disagree - within the context of a common agreement.
8. We would end by expressing our thankfulness to God for the existence of the Commission and for its work; and we would assure them of our support and prayers in their efforts toward agreement in the truth.

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