
The Gift of Authority

An Observer's Report and Analysis

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On 12 May 1999, the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission released its most recent agreed statement, *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III* (hereafter *GA*).¹ This statement takes up one of the most difficult ecumenical topics – the authority within the church of official teaching – and addresses some of its most difficult aspects, from the role of the laity in teaching to the special teaching role of the bishop of Rome. The commission makes large claims for its work: “We believe that if this statement about the nature of authority and the manner of its exercise is accepted and acted upon, this issue will no longer be a cause of continued breach of communion between our two churches” (*GA* §51).

How does the commission reach this conclusion? What does it have to say about authority in the church? How does what it says relate to discussions in the wider ecumenical world, especially within the Faith and Order movement? In addressing these questions, I shall limit myself to the text of *GA* and not comment on what I observed within the work of the commission as the Faith and Order observer from the World Council of Churches. While seeing the text develop certainly aids in understanding it, what is said here does not depend on “inside information”. (I must add that the commission was unfailingly gracious in its welcome to me.)

Moreover, I will relate this report to the wider ecumenical concerns of Faith and Order, although my own Lutheran perspective will undoubtedly shape what I have to say. A bilateral dialogue, especially between churches as closely related as the Anglican and Catholic churches, naturally can agree in greater detail than is possible in the multilateral discussions typical of Faith and Order. We who are neither Catholic nor Anglican need both to ask ourselves what aspects of this text can be taken up into the wider discussion and to let ourselves be challenged by the specificity of what Anglicans and Catholics can say together.

Some preliminary considerations

Anglican-Catholic dialogue since the Second Vatican Council has gone through three institutional phases. A preparatory commission worked during 1967 and 1968 to devise a programme and structure for the dialogue.² On the basis of its work, a first Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission began work in 1970. It produced a series of texts during the 1970s, which were gathered together with a preface and

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introduction in the *Final Report* of 1982.³ In addition to sections on the eucharist and on ministry and ordination, the *Final Report* contained two texts on authority (titled simply *Authority I* and *Authority II*) and a set of Elucidations to *Authority I* (these texts will hereafter be referred to as *Auth I*, *Auth II* and *Auth EI*). Unlike the texts on the eucharist and on ministry, the texts on authority indicate continuing areas of significant disagreement (e.g., *Auth I*, Preface, §24; *Auth II*, §29).⁴ ARCIC was reconstituted following the release of the *Final Report*, and a new team produced a series of further statements on *Salvation and the Church* (1987), *Church as Communion* (1991) and *Life in Christ* (1994).

Meanwhile, the *Final Report* was being evaluated by the Anglican and Catholic churches. The 1988 Lambeth conference of Anglican bishops sought to summarize the responses from the various provinces of the Anglican communion. While it affirmed the eucharist and ministry documents as “consonant in substance with the faith of Anglicans and... a sufficient basis for taking the next step forward towards the reconciliation of our churches”, the statements on authority were said simply to be “a firm basis for the direction and agenda of the continuing dialogue”.⁵ The provinces had responded with “a clear ‘yes’” to the eucharist and ministry texts, but their evaluations of the authority statements were only “generally positive”, raising questions “especially concerning primacy, jurisdiction and infallibility, collegiality, and the role of the laity”.⁶ The Vatican response, not released until 1991, was more negative in its assessment of the authority texts, especially in relation to the treatment of infallibility and reception, where it found “a different understanding” from that of the First Vatican Council.⁷

The responses to the *Final Report* thus laid a double burden on ARCIC when it returned to the question of authority. On the one hand, the agreements on eucharist and ministry made authority appear as the one major stumbling block on the path to Anglican-Catholic communion (especially if differences over the ordination only of men are seen as a function of differences over authority).⁸ On the other hand, the somewhat guarded Anglican affirmation and critical Vatican response meant that the commission needed to revisit with some care issues already addressed.

GA is striking in its combination of concrete suggestions for ecumenical action with theological discussions of foundational questions of Trinity and of ecclesiology. While a number of journalists have focused their reports only on *GA*'s proposal regarding the exercise of papal primacy even prior to full communion, the preface invites readers “to follow the path that led the commission to its conclusions”. Bishop Mark Santer, Anglican co-chair during the production of *GA*, emphasized at the press conference releasing the text that people should read the agreed statement rather than immediately react to reports of its recommendations.⁹ A first general rule of interpretation should thus be always to place *GA*'s concrete proposals in the context of its wider theological analysis.

Of greater interpretative significance is the place of *GA* in the total work of ARCIC. How much weight should be placed on the subtitle “Authority in the Church III”? Is *GA* to be read as part of a cumulative argument and thus in the context of *Auth I*, *Auth II* and *Auth EI*? The preface to *GA* refers to the *Final Report*, with its statements on authority, as “important groundwork, preparing the way for further convergence”. Bishop Santer has stated that *GA* builds on the *Final Report* and thus does not go over ground already covered by the earlier texts.¹⁰ A second interpretative rule then must be

that *GA* is to be read not only in the immediate context of its own theological argument, but also in the larger context of the other ARCIC statements on authority. As I will argue below, however, just how *GA* relates to the earlier ARCIC authority texts is itself a significant question for its interpretation.

The argument

At the heart of *GA* is the intent to present authority in the church not as a necessary evil, but rather as a positive good, a gift of God in aid of mission.¹¹ "Authority rightly exercised is a gift of God to bring reconciliation and peace to humankind" (*GA* §5). Authority in the church, which derives from the authority of God (§7), "has a radically missionary dimension. Authority is exercised within the church for the sake of those outside it, that the gospel may be proclaimed 'in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction'" (§32).¹²

GA develops its argument around an exegesis of 2 Corinthians 1:20: "For in him [Christ] every one of God's promises is a 'Yes'. For this reason it is through him that we say the 'Amen,' to the glory of God" (*GA* §8). God's affirmation of the divine promise of salvation in Jesus Christ calls for an affirmatory Amen on the part of humanity. This Amen is internally complex. The perfect human Amen is already provided by God in the Amen of the man Jesus (§9). The Amen of Christ's sisters and brothers is called forth by and incorporated into the Amen of Jesus (§10). A participatory structure is thus essential to the human Amen in its necessary christological dimension. This participatory christological dimension then points to the interaction between the Amen of the individual and that of the church. As the individual Christian is taken up into Christ only as simultaneously taken up into his body, the church, so the Amen of the individual is also taken up into the church's Amen. "When a believer says Amen to Christ individually, a further dimension is always involved: an Amen to the faith of the Christian community... The Amen said to what Christ is *for each believer* is incorporated within the Amen the church says to what Christ is *for his body*" (§12).

The Amen of the church is itself a complex phenomenon, realized in the interaction of diverse charisms (*GA* §28) within the overarching process of Tradition, understood as "an act of communion whereby the Spirit unites the local churches of our day with those that preceded them in the one apostolic faith" (§16).¹³ The *sensus fidei* empowers "every Christian who is seeking to be faithful to Christ and is fully incorporated into the life of the church" (§29) to participate in the formation of the church's mind, each in accord with his or her particular charism.

This interaction is discussed in the context of a comprehensive ecclesiology which readers will recognize as a variant of the many closely related communion ecclesiologies to be found in ecumenical documents. The central ecclesiological term is "synodality", which *GA* understands in terms of its etymology as the "walking together" which typifies those who "follow Jesus on the way" (*GA* §34).¹⁴ Within this synodality, Tradition occurs and the Amen of the church is pronounced from age to age. If this Amen is to be spoken with clarity, decisions will need to be made about its content. While these decisions always involve the entire body (§§30,43), some persons within that body, particularly those who exercise a ministry of *episcopate*, have special responsibilities:

The Spirit of Christ endows each bishop with the pastoral authority needed for the effective exercise of *episcopate* within a local church... Its binding nature is implicit in the bishop's

task of teaching the faith through the proclamation and explanation of the word of God, of providing for the celebration of the sacraments and of maintaining the church in holiness and truth (§36).

This ministry of *episcopate* “must never be separated from the ‘symphony’ of the whole people of God... The bishops, the clergy and the other faithful must all recognize and receive what is mediated from God through each other. Thus the *sensus fidelium* of the people of God and the ministry of memory exist together in reciprocal relation” (§30).¹⁵

The faith of the community affirmed and expressed in this process has an essential priority to the faith of the individual. “The meaning of the revealed gospel of God is fully understood only within the church. God’s revelation has been entrusted to a community... The faith of the community precedes the faith of the individual” (*GA* §23). The inevitably partial faith of the individual needs to grow into the fuller, more comprehensive faith of the church and thus become “yet more complete as that person receives all that the church, in faithfulness to the word of God, affirms to be the authentic content of the divine revelation” (§12).

How is this synodal process of Tradition kept faithful to its apostolic foundations? On the one hand, the entire process is understood to be grounded in and ruled by the scriptures, which “within Tradition... occupy a unique and normative place and belong to what has been given once for all”. The church “regards this corpus alone as the inspired word of God written and, as such, uniquely authoritative” (*GA* §19). On the other hand, *GA* understands the promise of Christ to uphold the church and to send the Spirit who will lead the church into truth as implying both the indefectibility of the church and the infallibility of certain teachings:

In specific circumstances, those with this ministry of oversight (*episcopate*), assisted by the Holy Spirit, may together come to a judgment which, being faithful to scripture and consistent with apostolic Tradition, is preserved from error. By such a judgment, which is a renewed expression of God’s one yes in Jesus Christ, the church is maintained in the truth so that it may continue to offer its amen to the glory of God. This is what is meant when it is affirmed that the church may teach *infallibly* (see Auth II, 24-28, 32)... [Such teaching] requires the participation, in their distinctive ways, of the whole body of believers, not only those charged with the ministry of memory... Since it is the faithfulness of the whole people of God which is at stake, reception of teaching is integral to the process (§§42-43).

The *Final Report* had already affirmed the complementary functions of conciliarity and primacy within *episcopate* (Auth I §§19-23), concluding that both conciliarity and primacy would need to be realized at the universal level:

The only see which makes any claim to universal primacy and which has exercised and still exercises such *episcopate* is the see of Rome, the city where Peter and Paul died. It seems appropriate that in any future union a universal primacy such as has been described should be held by that see (*Auth I* §23; cp. *Auth II* §9).¹⁶

GA notes that this primatial ministry includes “a specific ministry concerning the discernment of truth as an expression of universal primacy”. Such teaching “may, however, express only the faith of the church” and is always “pronounced *within* the college of those who exercise *episcopate*... When the faith is articulated in this way, the bishop of Rome proclaims the faith of the local churches. It is thus the wholly reliable teaching of the whole church that is operative in the judgment of the universal primate” (*GA* §47).

This theological argument forms the context for the specific suggestions included in the last section of *GA*, "Steps towards Visible Unity". The commission notes issues that will need to be faced by Anglicans (e.g., "Is the communion also open to the acceptance of instruments of oversight which would allow decisions to be reached that in certain circumstances would bind the whole church?"; §56) and by Catholics (e.g., "Is there at all levels effective participation of clergy as well as lay people in emerging synodal bodies?"; §57). It calls for a renewed collegiality between Catholic and Anglican bishops. Finally, it states that its work "has resulted in sufficient agreement on universal primacy as a gift to be shared for us to propose that such a primacy could be offered and received even before our churches are in full communion" (§60). Such a primacy could "even now" uphold diversity, while exercising leadership in the world and in both communions. It could address both communions "in a prophetic way" and "might gather the churches in various ways for consultation and discussion" (§§60f.).

Challenges and issues

From even so brief a description, the far-reaching issues *GA* raises are evident. Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold of the Episcopal Church USA, present Anglican co-chair of ARCIC, has stated that *GA* "calls for careful and prolonged study and discussion rather than immediate reaction and response".¹⁷ The analysis that follows is intended as a contribution to such study and discussion. It will focus on four inter-related themes where I believe discussion can fruitfully be taken up. The intent is less to critique *GA* than to indicate some areas where I believe the discussion needs to be pressed.

1. *The faith of the individual and the faith of the church*

The natural tendency to focus on the controversial issues of infallibility and primacy should not divert attention from the more comprehensive discussion in *GA* of the complex inter-relation of the faith of the individual Christian and the faith of the church. The double Amen theme which expresses this inter-relation in *GA* is not just rhetorical ornamentation, but an important theological assertion which might prove fruitful in wider ecumenical discussions.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, in one of the first attempts to specify a comprehensive or fundamental difference between Protestantism and Catholicism, focussed on just this question of the relation between individual and church:

The antithesis [*Gegensatz*] between Protestantism and Catholicism may provisionally be conceived thus: the former makes the individual's relation to the church dependent on his relation to Christ, while the latter contrariwise makes the individual's relation to Christ dependent on his relation to the church.¹⁸

This typology, often simplified and misunderstood, has had considerable influence. Cardinal Ratzinger has used language reminiscent of *GA* to describe the Lutheran-Catholic divide in terms of the individual-church relation:

In Luther's view faith is no longer, as it is for Catholics, of its essence a sharing in faith with the entire church... For Catholics on the contrary the church itself is contained in the inmost principle of the act of faith; it is only by sharing in faith with the church that I have a part in that certainty on which I can base my life.¹⁹

The double Amen analysis of *GA* avoids these dichotomies, though not by merely trying to find some neutral ground between the poles. On the one hand, *GA* clearly asserts the essentially ecclesial character of individual faith. This assertion should not be ecumenically problematic.²⁰ Even *GA*'s assertion that "the faith of the community precedes the faith of the individual" (*GA* §23) should not itself be problematic. The faith of every individual is subordinate to "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3).

On the other hand, *GA* does not subordinate the faith of the individual to that of the church as to a foreign body. The faith of the church is realized in the ongoing process of tradition in which every Christian participates (or at least can and should participate):

The people of God as a whole is the bearer of the living Tradition. In changing situations producing fresh challenges to the gospel, the discernment, actualization and communication of the word of God is the responsibility of the whole people of God. The Holy Spirit works through all members of the community, using the gifts he gives to each for the good of all (*GA* §28).

The faith of the church is not simply the sum of the faith of all individual Christians, but it is realized in and inseparable from the ongoing process in which the faith of individuals, each with his or her own charism, encounters both the faith of other individuals of the present and the faith of the past. There is thus a sense, even if a subordinate one, in which the faith of individuals has a certain sort of priority to the faith of the community: the faith of individuals is ontologically foundational for the faith of the church; the faith of the church exists only in and through the faith of individuals. *GA* does not make such an affirmation, but the grounds for making it are present in what it says.

But one may ask whether *GA* sufficiently represents the tensions that can typify – and have typified – this inter-relation of individual and church. *GA* recognizes that individuals need to grow into the more comprehensive faith of the church and that "growing into this faith may be for some an experience of questioning and struggle" (*GA* §12). For the sake of mission, the church must make authoritative decisions about its teaching (§32). The "binding nature" of such teaching is implicit in the "task of teaching the faith... The faithful are able in conscience both to recognize God at work in the bishop's exercise of authority and also to respond to it as believers" (§36). "In freely accepting the way of salvation offered through baptism, the Christian disciple also freely takes on the discipline of being a member of the body of Christ" (§49). This discipline may involve obedience, although "an obedience of freedom and not slavery" (§36).²¹

GA also notes, however, that "the integrity of the believer's conscience" is essential to the individual's growth into the faith of the church (§12). Thus, "the exercise of authority must always respect conscience" (§49). The exercise of authority "in the structures and corporate life of the church must be conformed to the mind of Christ (cf. Phil. 2:5)" (*GA* §35). "Human weakness and sin do not only affect individual ministers. They can distort the human structuring of authority (cf. Matt. 23). Therefore, loyal criticism and reforms are sometimes needed, following the example of Paul (cf. Gal. 2:11-14)" (§48). This loyal criticism should not be understood negatively, but can contribute to the vitality and faithfulness of the ongoing tradition.

While recognizing the potential for tension between the individual and the church, does *GA* recognize the endemic character, not only of tension, but also of conflict within the life of the church – both conflict between authorities (as between Paul and Peter at Antioch) and conflict between those who exercise and those who are under authority (as between Paul and the church at Corinth)? The preface to *Auth I* noted that “there is much in the document... which presents the ideal of the church as willed by Christ. History shows how the church has often failed to achieve this ideal.” A similar statement could be made about *GA*. Conflict is not only a reality of the post-Reformation church, with its divisions and wars of religion, but was also a frequent fact of life for the patristic and mediaeval church, East and West, even if such conflict could often be contained without division.

Would the analysis of authority in *GA* be different if a less idealized picture of the individual-group relation were assumed and authority were depicted as operating more often in situations of conflict where it is under challenge? A full answer cannot be explored here. A beginning point might be Stephen Sykes' argument that Christianity is itself an “essentially contested concept..., a term which occurs again and again in the history of the discussion of a subject and yet is the subject of a chronic series of disputes”.²² If conflict, or at least dissent, is a more abiding characteristic of the church, then the question of the relation between authority and dissent will need more attention than *GA* has given it. This issue will arise again below when I mention the problem of abuses.

2. *The role of the laity*

At various points *GA* has taken up the request of the Anglican communion that the role of the laity in relation to the exercise of authority be further explored in the continuing work of ARCIC. The inter-relation of individual and church is of course aimed at indicating how the faith of each individual enters into the formation of the mind of the church. In addition, *GA* unambiguously affirms that the bearer of the apostolic tradition is ultimately the church as a whole and that the church as a whole bears final responsibility for the discernment necessary for the faithful transmission of tradition (*GA* §28). Thus, “the exercise of teaching authority in the church, especially in situations of challenge, requires the participation in their distinctive ways of the whole body of believers” (§43). The laity are empowered to this participation by the *sensus fidei* (§29). The *sensus fidelium* has a “reciprocal relationship” with the distinctive ministry of memory exercised by bishops (§30).

But readers may want a bit more detail here. What constitutional or juridical role do the laity have in the actual decisions that result in authoritative teaching? Are they only to be consulted by those who finally must decide, or are they among those who finally make decisions? To ask this question is not to deny that those ordained to teach and proclaim have a distinctive role in that process, but it is to ask about the precise nature of that role.

While noting that “consulting the faithful is an aspect of episcopal oversight”, *GA* goes on to say that the role of the bishops “is magisterial: that is, in this communion of the churches, they are to determine what is to be taught as faithful to the apostolic Tradition” (§38). But how is one to interpret “determine” here? Does it mean “to fix conclusively or authoritatively” (the first definition in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*) or something more like “shape, decide the limits of, make a decisive contribution

to”? Since this sentence is jointly affirmed of the Anglican churches and the Catholic Church, it would seem that it is not the former definition that is meant – although the paragraph then continues: “Roman Catholics and Anglicans share this understanding of synodality, but express it in different ways.” As §39 notes, in the Anglican communion “although bishops, clergy and laypersons consult with each other *and legislate together*, the responsibility of the bishops remains distinct and crucial” (emphasis added). In the Anglican churches with which I am acquainted, the bishops as a body do have a “distinct and crucial” role in determining such matters as doctrine and liturgy, but without a determinative – and not just consultative – role being played by other clergy and laity in some sort of legislative process.

GA would thus seem to be open to a role for laity or clergy other than bishops in the synodal process by which decisions about authoritative teachings are made. For many churches in the wider fellowship of the World Council of Churches, it is a matter of some theological importance that laity should have such a role, even though recent Faith and Order studies have affirmed the special teaching role of those who exercise a ministry of oversight.²³ What is needed is a more precise definition of the respective roles of bishops, clergy and laity in the decision-making moment of authoritative teaching. Neither *GA* nor the earlier ARCIC texts on authority go into this sort of constitutional and canonical detail. While this may be fully in accord with the nature of their task, the theological principles that ought to shape such constitutional details will need to be explored, as wider ecumenical discussion on authority continues.

3. Reception

The texts on authority in the ARCIC *Final Report* devoted significant attention to the inter-relation between authoritative teaching and its reception. Indeed, it did some of its most significant work on this topic (*Auth I* §3; *Auth II* §25,29-31). However, the Vatican response raised pointed questions about just this aspect of the *Final Report*. How does *GA* handle these issues and how does this relate to what was said in the *Final Report*?²⁴

GA consistently places authority in the context of the whole church and its synodality. Thus it is not surprising that it more specifically seeks to inter-relate infallible teaching and reception. Nevertheless, while stating that reception is “integral to the process” of such teaching (§43), *GA* does not repeat the language of *Auth II* §25: “Although it is not through reception by the people of God that a definition first acquires authority, the assent of the faithful is the ultimate indication that the church’s authoritative decision in a matter of faith has been truly preserved from error by the Holy Spirit.”²⁵ Nor do the Anglicans of ARCIC feel compelled to repeat in *GA* the reservation that “if the definition proposed for assent were not manifestly a legitimate interpretation of biblical faith and in line with orthodox tradition, Anglicans would think it a duty to reserve the reception of the definition for study and discussion” (*Auth II* §29).²⁶ Rather, *GA* speaks about both infallibility and reception in descriptive sentences affirmed by both Anglicans and Catholics in the commission without any appended reservation. In addition to the two decisive sentences on infallibility and reception from §§42 and 43 already cited, §43 goes on to say about reception: “When the people of God respond by faith and say Amen to authoritative teaching, it is because they recognize that this teaching expresses the apostolic faith and operates within the authority and truth of Christ, the head of the church.”

The indicative mood and descriptive style are important. Rather than saying that if an allegedly infallible teaching “were not manifestly a legitimate interpretation of biblical faith”, then Anglicans would have to withhold judgment about it, *GA* simply states that an infallible teaching is “a judgment which, being faithful to scripture and consistent with apostolic Tradition, is preserved from error” (*GA*, §42). Similarly, rather than saying that reception is a sign that valid authoritative teaching has occurred, *GA* simply states that “reception of teaching is integral to the process [of the exercise of teaching authority]” (§43).

Paragraph 47, which deals with the teaching of the papacy, is similar in style, but with a more explicit emphasis on the duty to teach in accord with scripture and authentic tradition: “In solemnly formulating such teaching, the universal primate must discern and declare, with the assured assistance and guidance of the Holy Spirit, in fidelity to scripture and Tradition, the authentic faith of the whole church, that is, the faith proclaimed from the beginning.”

This indicative mood and descriptive style help bring *GA* into line with both Catholic and Anglican convictions. On the one hand, the Second Vatican Council made similar statements, also in the indicative: “This teaching authority is not above the word of God but stands at its service” (*Dei verbum*, §10); “The infallibility promised to the church exists also in the body of bishops when, along with the successor of Peter, it exercises the supreme teaching office. The assent of the church, however, can never fail to be given to these definitions on account of the activity of the same Holy Spirit, by which the whole flock of Christ is preserved and moves forward in the unity of faith” (*Lumen gentium* §25, cf. §12).²⁷

On the other hand, Anglican insistence that teaching be subordinate to scripture is also respected in *GA*. So Michael Nazir-Ali, Bishop of Rochester (Church of England) and member of the commission, has said that Anglicans should welcome *GA*, “as it makes scripture normative in the life of the church. While it recognizes the place of the teaching office, it places it firmly under God’s revelation and requires that the magisterium should teach strictly in consonance with this revelation.”²⁸

But how do these descriptive, indicative statements relate to what the *Final Report* had to say about reception and the Anglican reservations cited above? I see at least four possibilities: (1) what these statements in the *Final Report* had to say about reception has now been rejected as mistaken; (2) *GA* takes no position on these statements, perhaps because it makes claims at a level of generality that does not require taking a position; (3) *GA* presupposes these statements in *Auth II*; (4) because of what *GA* says about the subordination of the teaching authority to scripture and about reception as integral to the process of teaching, the specific language of the cited sentences from the *Final Report* is judged to be no longer necessary.

The first of these options can be rejected: both explicitly in the preface and implicitly throughout the text, *GA* affirms the *Final Report* so consistently that any argument that it repudiates the *Final Report* at some point would need unambiguous evidence of this – which is lacking in this case. My sense is that the fourth option most adequately describes the relation of *GA* to the quoted sentences of the *Final Report*, but any analysis will need to be nuanced.

On the general question of the relation between reception and authoritative teaching, *GA* and the *Final Report* do not, I believe, significantly diverge. *GA*’s statement that “reception of teaching is integral to the process” of authoritative teaching (§43)

echoes its own description of the *Final Report* as affirming that “the laity play an integral part in decision-making in the church” (§1, citing *Auth El* §4). If there is a shift between the *Final Report* and *GA*, it comes in the non-repetition of the Anglican reservation voiced in *Auth II* §29. If my fourth interpretative option is correct, then the commission, and in particular its Anglican members, judge that *GA* so binds the teaching office into the wider life of the church and so subordinates that office to revelation that this reservation is no longer necessary.

Three comments should be immediately made about such an interpretation. First, there are passages in *GA* (including the quoted sentences) that might be read as indicating the third option, that *GA* presupposes the *Final Report*. *GA* states that the scriptures “require the church constantly to measure its teaching, preaching and action against them. ‘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’ (*Authority in the Church: Elucidation, 2*)” (*GA* §19). The next-to-the-last sentence in the discussion of the reception of infallible teaching in §43 states: “God’s ‘Yes’ revealed in Christ is the standard by which such authoritative teaching is judged.” *GA* thus still speaks of reception involving a judgment.

Second, this evidence can however be interpreted in another way. William Henn notes that if reception is to be more than a “blind fideism” which the Catholic Church has rejected, it cannot be utterly divorced from the exercise of judgment on the part of those doing the receiving. He emphasizes that the sentence in §43 that speaks of teaching being judged, is followed by another sentence, which states: “Such teaching is to be welcomed by the people of God as a gift of the Holy Spirit to maintain the church in the truth of Christ, our Amen to God.” Henn concludes: “One cannot divorce the text’s two verbs ‘welcome’ and ‘judge’ in the reception of defined doctrine, as if one would be able to welcome a teaching as an authentic interpretation of God’s revealed word even though one found oneself utterly incapable of reasonably judging it to be able to be considered’ as such.”²⁹ Thus, language of a moment of judgment within reception need not imply the continued assertion of the Anglican reservation in *Auth II* §29.

Third, the limits that Catholic doctrine actually places on the significance of reception for infallible teaching are less than perfectly clear. On the one hand, as we saw earlier, the Second Vatican Council held that the assent of the faithful “can never fail to be given” to an infallible teaching. The reasoning of Henry Chadwick and Edward Yarnold here seems ironclad: “It follows from this statement that the absence of the assent of the church would show that there had been no authentic conciliar definition.”³⁰ On the other hand, the First Vatican Council stated that infallible definitions of doctrine “are of themselves, and not by the consent of the church, irreformable” (Denz. 3074). In his commentary on *GA*, Henn argues that this statement must be interpreted in the context of Gallican ideas which would have made the formal ratification of papal teaching a precondition for its inclusion in the authoritative teaching of the church. The Catholic question on this subject to the ARCIC text is then: “Can the affirmations by ARCIC II [i.e., *GA*] relating such special teachings on the part of the primate to the faith of the whole church be interpreted as making the approval of the whole the juridic condition which guarantees such teaching, as if, in the absence of universal antecedent unanimity or consequent reception, no definition can be said to occur?” He answers: “To interpret ARCIC II in this way would be to misconstrue the text, in my opinion.”³¹

If Henn is correct, then the question can also be asked whether in speaking of reception as “the ultimate indication” of preservation from error, the *Final Report* is incompatible with the First Vatican Council.³²

The treatment in *GA* of infallible teaching and reception is sure to be a focus of discussion. On the one hand, neither *GA* nor the earlier *Final Report* develops an extensive argument for the specific claim that the primacy of the bishop of Rome extends to exercising the infallible teaching authority of the college of bishops in such a way that Christians can be assured that certain of his teachings are the authentic faith. It may be the case that such detailed argument is not the task of a commission such as ARCIC. If Christians and churches respond to the call from John Paul II to enter into “a patient and fraternal dialogue” on the primacy of the bishop of Rome (*Ut unum sint* §96), the precise nature of a primacy of teaching will be thoroughly tested. On the other hand, the role of reception is also an area various ecumenical texts are increasingly addressing. Both Faith and Order³³ and the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission³⁴ have recently released texts in which reception is spoken of in ways at least different in tone from the bold but careful presentation in *GA*. The precise nature and role of reception is certain to be a topic in the continued ecumenical debate over authority, and *GA* makes a significant contribution to it.

Even those who are convinced by the theological and conceptual arguments of *GA* may still be uneasy. On questions of authority and papal primacy, concepts can take us a significant distance, but can they finally do all the work that is needed? Can certain institutional and historical problems be addressed only in some other fashion?³⁵ I will focus this unease by raising an issue *GA* does not (and perhaps rightly does not) raise: abuses.

We cited earlier the comment in the preface to *Auth I* about the tendency of the text to speak of an ideal of the church, which “the church has often failed to achieve”. I have argued that *GA* continues this tendency, presenting a picture of the interaction of charisms in the church which prescind from the level of conflict which has often typified that interaction. Conflict generally centres on what is seen (rightly or wrongly) as a false or abusive exercise of authority. Often, the conflict that has surrounded the papacy and its authority, both with the East and within the West, has (especially in the early stages of the Reformation in the West)³⁶ had more to do with perceived abuses than with dissent from the sort of primacy described in *GA* and other similar ecumenical documents. This perception of abuse has entered non-Catholic historical consciousness and is itself a major obstacle to rapprochement between Catholics and non-Catholics on issues of authority.³⁷ *Abusus non tollit usum*, but abuses cannot be ignored.

As far as I can see, a conceptual argument by itself can settle the problem of abuses only if it makes a convincing case that abuses of certain sorts will not occur. One might read Catholic understandings of infallibility as just such an argument: the Spirit so guides and protects certain organs of the church's teaching authority in certain of their teachings in such a way that those teachings will not be in error. Even if one finds such an understanding of infallibility convincing (and of course many in the wider ecumenical world do not), significant abuses are still possible: the use of inappropriate means to protect the truth, the suppression of merely verbal deviations from official teaching as if they were manifest falsehood, the imposition of ordinary, non-infallible teaching as if it were infallible. In addition, it is often mentioned that mediaeval theol-

ogy and canon law admitted the possibility that even the pope could become a heretic.³⁸ While modern Catholic dogma has not denied this possibility, there are no institutionalized procedures for dealing with it.

The question of institutionalized procedures for dealing with the abuse of authority, especially papal authority, has been a central item of debate in the Western church at least since the conciliarist controversies of the late middle ages. Some have called for an institutionalized check or prescribed mode of appeal that could be invoked in cases when it is contended by someone that papal authority is being abused. Roman Catholic theology has consistently resisted such calls. One can appeal from a single bishop, a group of bishops, or even a conciliar majority to the pope, but one cannot appeal in any formal way *beyond* the pope to some higher instance.

GA helps to undercut the conclusion that this implies that for Catholic theology there is no limit to papal authority. As I read *GA* (and other ecumenical and Roman Catholic documents), the papacy is not understood as an unchecked authority, but as one so embedded in the entire process of synodality, in the comprehensive give-and-take which is the life of the church, that real limits do exist, but not ones that can be reduced to institutionalized procedures.³⁹ The bonds of collegiality should constitute a moral limit on the independent action of any bishop, including the bishop of Rome. *Auth II* spoke of the "moral limits" to the exercise of the pope's jurisdictional powers (§20). *GA*'s statement that reception is "integral" to the process of teaching need not imply that reception is a "juridic condition" of valid teaching, but reception can still be a real if non-institutionalized (and non-institutionalizable) indication of a limit to conciliar and papal authority.

The wider ecumenical discussion of authority, including conciliar and papal authority, will need to address the question of abuses and the checks that limit abuses. On the one hand, what institutionalized checks and modes of appeal are theologically appropriate and historically needed? Those (like myself) from traditions which have called for such checks need to be aware of what a system of checks can and cannot do. Any system of authority can be abused. The need to check abuses must be set alongside the need for the church to teach with clarity for the sake of its mission. Those of us (like myself) who are imbued with the procedures and values of modern Western democracy need to be self-critical of the modern West's idealization of procedural justice.

On the other hand, how do we understand and embody the non-procedural checks which may be inherent in the dynamic which forms the *sensus fidelium*? How does the church embody that listening to the Spirit, that mutual affirmation and admonition, that respect for collegiality, which cannot be legislated, but which forms true openness to divine guidance, the ultimate authority? The non-institutionalizable dimension of the location of authority within community requires a life together which embodies the practices, the trust, and the spirituality inherent in a theologically appropriate exercise of authority.

4. *The exercise of primacy prior to full communion*

The foregoing considerations should throw into relief the importance of the suggestion in *GA* of some exercise of papal primacy beyond the borders set by full communion with the Roman Catholic Church (§60). If the ecumenical problem of authority is not just a problem of theological concepts, but also of institutions and history,

then a solution must go beyond what can be done in a dialogue document such as *GA*. The solution must include actions which begin to establish a new history. Especially if some of the most important limits to authority are not matters of institutionalizable procedures but rather practices involving elements of discernment that cannot be pre-judged, then a history needs to be begun in which those practices are embodied and experienced by the wider church. The re-reception of the universal primacy of the bishop of Rome will need to be more than a conceptual matter, and it cannot occur all at once. It will need to be lived into.

On the one hand, in light of a history of perceived abuse, those who are not Catholics will need to experience papal authority as indeed a gift. The argument that checks on conciliar or papal authority must finally be non-institutional requires trust and trust needs historical roots. An exercise of some form of primacy prior to full communion can help to develop those roots.

On the other hand, the re-reception of universal primacy among Roman Catholics may (I would say, does) require not just new theological understandings, but also new practices which more visibly embody the virtues of synodality and collegiality which *GA* discuss. David Yeago states the matter clearly:

What is called for is decisive *action* by which the papacy would identify itself in unmistakable ways *in practice* and *at the level of structures* with the affirmation of legitimate diversity, the collegial exercise of authority, and the wide diffusion of responsibility within the church.⁴⁰

The sort of extended primacy suggested in *GA* §60 could be an important context for the development of such practices, the sort of practices that would address the issues raised for the Catholic Church in *GA* §57.

In making this suggestion, *GA* is giving concrete form to the suggestion made in the last sentence in the last numbered paragraph in *Auth II* (§33): "Some difficulties will not be wholly resolved until a practical initiative has been taken and our two churches have lived together more visibly in the one *koinonia*." I believe this sentence forms a context for reading the claim in *GA* that "if this statement... is accepted *and acted upon*, this issue [authority] will no longer be a cause for continued breach of communion between our two churches" (§51; italics added). *GA* has certainly gone a long way towards resolving the problem of authority, at least as it exists between Anglicans and Catholics. What is needed now are the actions that will help the churches move from what must be done by thought to what can only be done by life.

If this suggestion of *GA* is taken up by the Anglican and Catholic churches, the rest of the ecumenical world should watch with great interest. Of course, what is acceptable to Catholics and Anglicans may not be acceptable to others. It might nevertheless form a paradigm that others could adapt.

NOTES

¹ Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III*, London, Catholic Truth Society; Anglican Book Centre; Church Publishing, 1999.

² See Alan C. Clark and Colin Davey, eds, *Anglican/Roman Catholic Dialogue: The Work of the Preparatory Commission*, London, Oxford UP, 1974. On the history of the preparatory commission, see William Purdy, *The Search for Unity: Relations Between the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches from the 1950s to the 1970s*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1996, pp.99-114.

- ³ The text of the *Final Report*, along with extensive accompanying documentation, is to be found in Christopher Hill and E. J. Yarnold, eds, *Anglicans and Roman Catholics: The Search for Unity*, London, SPCK, 1994. The history of this phase of the dialogue is told in Purdy, *Search for Unity*, pp.131-226.
- ⁴ The exact nature of the claimed consensus in the ARCIC *Final Report* is not altogether clear. See J. Robert Wright, "Fundamental Consensus: An Anglican Perspective", in Joseph A. Burgess, ed., *In Search of Christian Unity: Basic Consensus/Basic Differences*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 1991, pp.168-84.
- ⁵ Hill and Yarnold, *Anglicans and Roman Catholics*, p.153.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.154f.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p.159.
- ⁸ On authority as the decisive issue now in Anglican-Catholic relations, see GA, preface, and Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology*, New York, Crossroad, 1988, p.91.
- ⁹ Glyn Paflin, "ARCIC Agrees Papal Role", *Church Times* (internet edition), 14 May 1999, <<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/news2.htm>>.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ In accord with Bishop's Santer's call to read the text, I will not here attempt to give a full account of the content of GA, but only to indicate the salient points relevant to the later analysis. A good summary of GA can be found in Mary Tanner, "The Gift of Authority: A Commentary", *Anglican World*, Trinity, 1999, pp.33-36.
- ¹² GA here is echoing earlier statements in *Auth I* §§2,18; *Auth II* §24. Similar statements can be found in Faith and Order documents, e.g., *How Does the Church Teach Authoritatively Today?* Faith and Order Paper no. 91, Geneva, WCC, 1979, p.77; *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: An Instrument for an Ecumenical Reflection on Hermeneutics*, FO/98:3, Geneva, WCC-Faith and Order, 1998, §49.
- ¹³ GA (footnote 1) explicitly affirms and utilizes the usage of "Tradition", "tradition", and "traditions" from the 1963 Montreal Faith and Order world conference.
- ¹⁴ Those familiar with WCC discussions may wonder what is the difference between synodality and conciliarity. Synodality might be seen as a more dynamic, even eschatological, concept, because of its overtones of walking *towards* some reality ahead of us. In the recent Faith and Order text on *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, however, the terms "conciliar" and "synodal" are used in apposition as synonyms; *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper no. 181, Geneva, WCC, 1998, §§98,107.
- ¹⁵ "Ministry of memory" here refers to the special responsibility of the bishops to keep the church true to its apostolic foundations.
- ¹⁶ ARCIC's understanding of the need for a universal primacy has recently been affirmed by the House of Bishops of the Church of England in *May They All Be One: A Response of the House of Bishops of the Church of England to Ut Unum Sint*, House of Bishops Occasional Papers, London, Church House Publ., 1997, §44.
- ¹⁷ Frank T. Griswold, "The Gift of Authority", news release no. 1842, Anglican Communion News Service, 1999.
- ¹⁸ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, transl. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, New York, Harper & Row, 1963, sec. 24, thesis.
- ¹⁹ Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, p.113.
- ²⁰ Even Schleiermacher could say something similar: "Since Christian piety never arises independently and of itself in an individual, but only out of the communion [*Gemeinschaft*] and in the communion, there is no such thing as adherence to Christ except in combination with adherence to the communion": *The Christian Faith*, sect. 24.4.
- ²¹ GA rightly and helpfully conjoins to the concept of authority its necessary correlate, the concept of obedience (see §§6,10,22,36). I wonder if wider ecumenical discussions can make progress on the issue of authority without a related discussion of obedience. Stanley Hauerwas has recently stated: "The problem in the mainline Protestant churches is that we no longer can imagine what it would mean to obey": *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1998, p.166.
- ²² Stephen Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity: Theologians and the Essence of Christianity from Schleiermacher to Barth*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984, p.251. Sykes takes the idea of an essentially contested concept from the work of W.B. Gallie, *Philosophy and Historical Understanding*, 2nd ed, New York, Schocken, 1968, pp.157-90.
- ²³ *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, §§105; *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, §§55.
- ²⁴ An extensive analysis of the relation between the Vatican response to the *Final Report* and GA can be found in William Henn, "A Commentary on *The Gift of Authority* of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission" (1999), <<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/documents/authority/commhennenglish.html>>.

- ²⁵ Prior to the *Final Report*, the American Lutheran-Catholic dialogue had said something very similar: "In the church universal the harmony between the teaching of the ministers and its acceptance by the faithful constitutes a sign of the fidelity of that teaching to the gospel" (Paul C. Empie, T. Austin Murphy and Joseph A. Burgess, eds, *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church*, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VI, Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1978, p.31). My attention was directed to this parallel by David S. Yeago, "The Papal Office and the Burdens of History", presentation at conference on "Church Unity and the Papal Office" (St Paul, MN, 1999).
- ²⁶ *Auth II* §30 gives the dogmas of Mary's immaculate conception and bodily assumption as examples of Catholic teachings many Anglicans would not recognize as "manifestly a legitimate interpretation of biblical faith". Language similar to *Auth II* §30 can be found in the response to *Ut unum sint* by the synod of bishops of the Church of England; *May They All Be One*, §33.
- ²⁷ Note also the recent comment of John Paul II in *Ut unum sint* §80: "We are in fact dealing with issues [in ecumenical dialogues] which frequently are matters of faith, and these require universal consent, extending from the bishops to the lay faithful, all of whom have received the anointing of the Holy Spirit. It is the same Spirit who assists the Magisterium and awakens the *sensus fidei*."
- ²⁸ Michael Nazir-Ali, "The Gift of Authority", press release no. Com99.13, Rochester, Diocese of Rochester, 1999, <<http://www.anglican.org.uk/nb/press2/com9913.shtml>>.
- ²⁹ Henn, "Commentary on GA", 11.
- ³⁰ E.J. Yarnold and Henry Chadwick, *Truth and Authority: A Commentary on the Agreed Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission "Authority in the Church"*, Venice 1976, London, SPCK, 1977, pp.21f. The reasoning can be symbolized. Let "p" stand for "x is an infallible teaching" and "r" for "x is assented to by the faithful". The Vatican II statement could then be symbolized: p → r. The *modus tollens* conclusion then follows: (p → r) → (*r → *p).
- ³¹ Henn, "Commentary on GA", 15.
- ³² On this question, see, e.g., Christopher Hill in Hill and Yarnold, *Anglicans and Roman Catholics*, p.227.
- ³³ "The ongoing process of reception in the life of the church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit discerns the truth, or otherwise, of a conciliar decision" (Faith and Order commission, *Nature and Purpose of the Church*, §110).
- ³⁴ "No ecumenical council possesses final authority simply as an institution. Even with these early councils there was no guarantee that the guidance of a council was free from error of judgment or distortion of the truth. Its words were accepted as true and binding, not because a particular council spoke, nor because it had been convened by a particular authority, but because its decisions came to be received and recognized by the faithful in the local churches as expressing the truth of the gospel" (Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, "The Virginia Report", in *The Official Report of the Lambeth Conference 1998*, Transformation and Renewal: 18 July-9 August 1998, Lambeth Palace, Canterbury, England, Harrisburg, PA, Morehouse, 1998, p.54).
- ³⁵ From here to the end of this report, I have been strongly influenced by a recent presentation by David Yeago, "The Papal Office and the Burdens of History". This presentation should appear in a volume to be entitled *Church Unity and the Papal Office*, eds Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson.
- ³⁶ Scott H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1981.
- ³⁷ Yeago is here blunt but, I think, accurate: "In the actual relations of our churches, the perception of the Roman primacy as a tyrannical power is a far more consequential barrier than any set of purely conceptual objections" (Yeago, "The Papal Office and the Burdens of History," p.8).
- ³⁸ Patrick Granfield, *The Limits of the Papacy: Authority and Autonomy in the Church*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1987, pp.71-73.
- ³⁹ For a Catholic affirmation of this view, with scholarly argument, see Patrick J. Burns, "Communion, Councils, and Collegiality: Some Catholic Reflections", in Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy, eds, *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church*, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue V, Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1974, p.170.
- ⁴⁰ Yeago, "The Papal Office and the Burdens of History", p.9.