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Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 7

BAPTISM, EUCHARIST & MINISTRY

(A review of the Lima report Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, published as Faith and Order Paper no. 111, WCC, £1.95, and due to be discussed by the General Synod in July 1983).

For about ten years now the Faith and Order Department of the World Council of Churches has been discussing successive drafts of this report. During the same period, the Faith and Order Department has been getting less and less prominent in the work of the World Council of Churches, with the growing activism, secularization and politicization of that body. From aiming at a reunion of the churches, on the basis of agreement (or compromise) in the realms of faith and order, and meeting continual frustration in the attempt, the WCC has latterly seemed to aim more at co-operation between the churches in their separate state, on a basis of liberation theology and charitable relief. The Eastern Orthodox Churches on the WCC, however, have constantly called for a reinstatement of the old aims, partly for religious reasons and partly, one presumes, for political. Left-wing though the prevailing politics of the WCC may be, churches from behind the Iron Curtain (as many of the Orthodox Churches are) feel uneasy unless the sensitive ground of politics is avoided altogether. The production of this report, and the circulation of it to the churches for their approval, can be reckoned a modest success for the Orthodox Churches and their sympathisers in attempting to steer the WCC back on to its original course.

The report consists of a text and a running commentary in parallel columns (the commentary being in italics). It is presumably the text to which the churches are asked to give their approval, though it is sometimes hard to see why particular material is in the text rather than in the commentary, and vice versa.

Those who saw the report in its earlier drafts will be interested to note how cagy it now is about the ordination of women and the admission of children to communion. The firm opposition to these innovations in some quarters had obviously had its effect in the revision. The ordination of women is now treated as an undecided issue (p. 24, para. 18), while the admission of children to communion is relegated to the commentary (p. 15, para. 19).

The scope of the report reflects the date at which it first appeared. Ten years ago, it was still commonly assumed that the churches were agreed on the basic truths of divine revelation, the Trinity and the Incarnation, and that the doctrines of church, ministry and sacraments were the only ones that hindered reunion. One could not make this assumption today, and it is significant that the ARCIC Final Report, which is being considered by the General Synod alongside this report, deals at length with Authority as well. The preface to the report begins, however, by reminding readers that the WCC is still officially committed by its Constitution to the doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity, 'according to the Scriptures' (p. vii), and this presumably is the basis on which its work must be assessed.

However, those who know how hard it is, in the present flux of opinion, to secure agreement on theological questions, will not be surprised if the Lima report is not wholly successful in trying to harmonize the views of all the many denominations represented on the Faith and Order Department. There are inherited differences between the denominations on the question whether one is mainly to be guided, in one's theological thinking, by Scripture (which is the reformed view) or by Tradition (which is the Roman Catholic and Orthodox view). And there are now deep-seated differences inside the denominations on the question whether Scripture and Tradition ought not both to give way to Reason (the Liberal view). One cannot, therefore, take it for granted that the official constitution of the WCC, with its scriptural and credal emphasis, will always be reflected in what the Lima report says.

Taking the parts of the report in turn, we will look first at Baptism. An attempt is here made to set out the biblical teaching and to deal with the traditional controversies. On the controversy with Baptists, whether baptism is an act of

God (grace) or an act of the recipient (commitment), the report truly says that it is both, though rightly putting the emphasis on the former (pp. 2-3, paras. 2-8). On the controversy with extreme sacramentalists, whether faith is necessary for the reception of baptismal grace, the report rightly says that it is (p. 3, para. 8). On the further controversy with Baptists, whether infants ought in that case to be baptized, the report really leaves the question open (p. 4, paras 11-13; p. 6, paras. 15-16), though condemning both re-baptism by Baptists (para. 13) and indiscriminate baptism by others (para. 16). It thus goes some way towards achieving the mutual recognition of baptism between Baptists and others which it seeks, especially as it declines to insist, as Baptists traditionally do, on immersion (p. 6, para 18). Another important controversy which is left open is the controversy with various schools of 'Catholic' and Orthodox opinion whether confirmation is (not just desirable, but) necessary to the reception of the Holy Spirit (pp. 5-6, paras. 14, 20). At points like this, the report becomes merely descriptive and not prescriptive: all that it can lead to is an agreement to differ.

Passing on to the Eucharist, this long statement is decidedly less satisfactory. After a brief recital of the New Testament references to the holy communion in the first paragraph, it launches out upon a series of vague, arbitrary and verbose assertions. It makes much play with the Greek term anamnesis (used at least ten times), which it translates 'memorial', telling us that the 'biblical idea of memorial' is 'the present efficacy of God's work when it is celebrated by God's people in liturgy' and that 'Christ himself with all that he has accomplished for us and for all creation (in his incarnation, servanthood, ministry, teaching, suffering, sacrifice, resurrection, ascension and sending of the Spirit) is present in this anamnesis' (p. 11, paras. 5-6). The New Testament emphasis that the sacramental commemoration 'proclaims Christ's death' (1 Cor. 11:26) is here quite lost to view. Elsewhere we are once told that Christ's sacrifice was 'accomplished once for all on the cross' (p. 11, para. 5), but this is the only place where the cross is given any special emphasis.

The preface to the report goes on (on p. x) to set out four rather lengthy questions which it would like the churches to answer in relation to the report. They can be summarized as follows:

(i) Does the church in question (in our case the Church of England) regard this report as expressing the historic Christian faith on these matters?

(ii) How does the report affect relations with other churches?

(iii) How does the report affect our own church life?

(iv) What further work remains for the Faith and Order Department of the WCC to do in seeking a 'Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today'? - One guesses that the General Synod will have a general debate on the report, and then (or later) commit these specific questions to a subcommittee, which will report back in preparation for a further debate. But as the report is being considered alongside the ARCIC Final Report, it is probable that the subcommittee will have one more question to consider,

(v) Does what the Lima report says on the Eucharist and the Ministry agree with what the ARCIC report says on these matters?

This question will not, of course, apply to Authority, which figures only in the ARCIC report, or to Baptism, which figures only in the Lima report.

The first of these five questions is obviously the most crucial, and the others must be answered in the light of the answer given to the first. We shall therefore concentrate here on the first question, and then conclude by a brief consideration of the others. The first question clearly does not intend to draw a distinction between the historic Christian faith and the faith of the Scriptures, though one must bear in mind that some historic traditions of Christianity are more biblical than others. The Church of England, which is committed to the supreme authority of Scripture by Articles 6 and 20 and by the recent Canon A5, will need to understand this question as referring to that faith which is both historic and biblical.

The nature of Christ's presence in the sacrament is said to be 'unique. Jesus said over the bread and wine of the eucharist: "This is my body... this is my blood..." What Christ declared is true' (p. 12, para. 13). It is here taken for granted that 'this is' does not mean 'this represents', as our Reformers held, and that the words omitted are unimportant. The commentary to paragraphs 13 and 15 emphasises that the ideas of a real presence in the elements and transubstantiation are fully in harmony with what is said in the text of the statement, though they are not insisted on.

As regards the eucharistic sacrifice, we are told that the eucharist 'is a representative act of thanksgiving and offering on behalf of the whole world' (p. 14, para. 20). 'The eucharist is the great sacrifice of praise... The bread and wine, fruits of the earth and of human labour, are presented to the Father in faith and thanksgiving. The eucharist thus signifies what the world is to become: an offering and hymn of praise to the Creator...' (p. 10, para. 4). The theology of the now unfashionable offertory procession is here prominent, but the commentary explains that the Roman Catholic idea

of a 'propitiatory sacrifice' is not excluded either (p. 11, para. 8).

A whole section, containing five paragraphs, is devoted to 'The Eucharist as Invocation of the Spirit' (p. 13, paras. 14-18). This idea is vigorously affirmed, without a shred of biblical evidence, presumably in deference to the Eastern Orthodox enthusiasm for their liturgical Epiclesis (the calling down of the Spirit upon the elements).

The material on the Ministry is better. It is first emphasised that all Christians have divine gifts and a ministry, not just the ordained (p. 20, paras. 1-6). There has, however, always been an institutional ministry as well, though the apostles, as Christ's eyewitnesses, had a 'unique and unrepeatable' role within it (p. 21, esp. para. 10). The ordained have authority, but are not to lord it over the flock (pp. 22-23, paras. 15-16), and any priesthood that they have is related to the priesthood of the church (p. 23, para. 17). Women have a place in the ministry of the church, but not necessarily in the ordained ministry (p. 24, para. 18). The threefold ministry is not held to be an apostolic requirement (p. 24, para. 19), and the 'apostolic succession' is seen primarily in terms of orderly transmission (p. 29, para. 35), but the relationship of bishop to presbyter is left as an open question (p. 25, para. 24). Finally, there is a rather inconclusive discussion of mutual recognition of ministries, raising the question whether non-episcopal churches ought not to adopt episcopacy, but denying that differences of practice on the ordination of women is an obstacle (p. 32, esp. paras. 53, 54). - To come on now to the other four questions posed:

(ii) Relations with other churches. Since the material on the Eucharist is so unsatisfactory, and that on the Ministry rather inconclusive, one of the best hopes would seem to be to develop relations with Baptists on the basis of the material on Baptism. It could be pointed out to them that the new Canons of the Church of England discourage indiscriminate baptism, and that Anglican confirmation has always included a personal confession of faith; and that if they were now willing to renounce the practice of re-baptism, a mutual recognition of baptism, as practised in the two Churches, would seem possible.

(iii) Anglican church life. Consequences in this realm are less obvious. It is plainly not desirable to adopt bad suggestions, and descriptions of the practice of other churches, even when innocent, can have no sort of obligation for our own church.

(iv) Future work. The Faith and Order Commission should certainly revise this report again, especially the section on the Eucharist, and should then address itself to the great issues which have recently come to the fore - divine revelation, the Trinity and the Incarnation, as well as the questions which divide Roman Catholics and Protestants, such as Justification.

(v) Comparison with ARCIC. The ARCIC report, where it deals with the Eucharist, has some of the same faults as the Lima report, notably in insisting on the Greek word anamnesis as a mysterious panacea, and in asserting the presence of Christ's body and blood in the elements. On the Ministry, however, where the ARCIC report is notably obscure, the Lima report could help the new ARCIC to clarify issues more satisfactorily.

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