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## **Biblical Truth for Today's Church**

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### **LATIMER COMMENT 15**

#### **THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE ORDAINED MINISTRY (GS 694, Church House Bookshop, £3.25)**

This is another lengthy report from the Faith and Order Advisory Group (FOAG) of the Board for Mission and Unity of the General Synod, running to 110 pages. It is to be debated by the General Synod in November 1986.

FOAG is chaired by the Bishop of Chichester, but has three Evangelicals among its members, whose presence seems to prevent its productions becoming too obtrusively Liberal Catholic, without succeeding in making them recognisably Evangelical. This must be the only Anglican report within living memory in which there are references to the great Evangelical theologians Dean Goode and Nathaniel Dimock (paragraphs 98, 107-8), but what difference the references make to the conclusions reached is hard to see!

The report explains that it was prepared in response to a private member's motion, passed by the General Synod in 1983, which asked for study to be undertaken in the hope of resolving 'the different and deeply held convictions existing within the Church of England (and other Christian bodies) concerning the nature of the ordained priesthood' (para. 1).

There is, of course, a considerable undercurrent of unease in the church today on the whole question of the role of the ordained ministry, and its relationship to the ministry of the laity, and the report would have done a great service if it had explored this central question. All it in fact does in this field is to devote a not very illuminating chapter (ch. 3) to the theme 'The Emergence of a Distinctive Ministry', drawing the reasonable conclusion that the institutional or ordained ministry has existed since apostolic times, and had reached what is essentially its present form by the middle of the second century. However, the motion passed by the General Synod concentrated on the narrower question of the sense in which the ordained ministry is priestly. This has been controversial for a much longer time than the more general question, and (as the motion noted) has underlain various disagreements in the General Synod, and also ecumenical disagreements. The heated Synod debate over the nature of priestly absolution in February 1983 (aroused by the proposed service for the Reconciliation of a Penitent) comes to mind, and the disagreement on priesthood between the Reformation churches and Rome, touched on in the ARCIC Final Report (Ministry and Ordination 13; Elucidation 2). So it is understandable that the present report does not devote more space to the wider question.

One could wish, however, that the narrower question were more satisfactorily treated. The problem is well stated, but not well answered. It is very fully analysed, under seven heads, in paragraph 24, as follows:

' since apostolic times has there always been a 'special ministry' in the Church, distinct from other ministries?

- if so, in what does this distinctiveness consist?
- is it proper to apply as normative to such a ministry a term (priest) which is not thus used in the New Testament?
- if so, in what ways is this ministry characteristically priestly? How is it related to the high-priesthood of Christ and the priesthood of the whole people of God?
- is the priesthood of the ordained ministry specifically related to presidency at the eucharist and the ministry of reconciliation?
- what connection is there between the understanding of the eucharist as somehow sacrificial and an understanding of the ordained ministry as priestly?
- if ordained ministers have a representative function, whom do they represent? Does this have a bearing on the question of the ordination of women to the episcopate and presbyterate?

The last of these seven questions is deliberately left open, but some of the others are given only a historical and not a theological answer. Nor are the historical answers always accurate. There is a great show of learning in the report, but a lot of it does not bear close inspection. The distinctive teaching of different writers and schools is repeatedly disguised by tendentious paraphrase and made to look as if it all agrees with the views which the report wants to put forward. Thus, there are question-begging accounts of the teaching of Ignatius (para. 53), Cyprian (para. 57), the early Anglicans (para. 81), the Council of Trent (paras. 93,98), the Tractarians (paras. 102, 135) and even the Epistle to the Hebrews (para. 47). Nor is the theology always accurate. The unfounded modern speculation about the sense of the word anamnesis is echoed (para. 118), the mystical body is treated as if it were a sacrificial image (para. 140), and a remarkably unguarded statement is made about a higher standard of holiness being required of the clergy (para. 144).

Coming on to the central issue, the report admits that the ordained minister is never called a priest in the New Testament (para. 52), and that his closest counterpart was the elder of the synagogue, not the priest of the temple (para. 51). The rest of the report is really an attempt to escape from these damaging admissions. It is claimed that in the period of the Fathers two tasks are confined to the ordained ministry, celebrating communion and pronouncing absolution (para. 63). These two tasks were therefore identified in the Middle Ages as the priestly tasks (para. 70), and ought still to be (para. 143), since in this respect the tasks of the ordained ministry belong to another realm than those of the laity, and are priestly in a unique way, as ARCIC rightly says (paras. 120,142). This completely overlooks the fact that in the period of the Fathers, and ever since, other tasks also have been confined to the ordained ministry, namely ordaining, confirming, and the ultimate pastoral oversight of congregations and dioceses. Are these tasks equally priestly? If not, why not? And as to the celebrating of communion and the pronouncing of absolution, if the New Testament does not confine them to the ordained ministry, is the subsequent rule of the church to this effect a matter of theology, or is it not rather a simple matter of discipline, however misunderstood?

The report also claims that its teaching is the teaching of the Church of England. They first admit that the English Reformers may have retained the title 'priest' just as a short form of presbyter, from which the English word is etymologically derived (para. 17), but afterwards they appear to deny this (para. 134), though there is ample evidence to prove it: see Jewel, Works (Parker Society), vol. 4, pp.911-912; Whitgift, Works (Parker Society, vol.3, pp. 350-351; Hooker, Ecclesiastical Polity 5:78:2-3, and other writers of less note. The report points out that the Latin word for priest, sacerdos, occurs in the Latin text of the 39 Articles - as it does, among other terms. But it is only used in Articles 31 and 32, in conventional mediaeval contexts, where the concern is to deny and not affirm mediaeval teaching. To this extent, Cranmer is happy with the Latin term, as the report says (para. 87) - but he is not happy with it any further than this, and his use of the English term is quite different. To Cranmer, and to the Anglican formularies, the ordained minister is a preaching pastor, not a sacrificing intermediary. He is an elder (Greek 'presbyter'), and a priest only in 'this sense.' "No other sense occurs" in the Anglican formularies, and in the older Anglican theologians any sense that goes beyond this is demonstrably figurative, not literal.

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