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Unity and Authority[1]

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The unity of the Church and the character and function of authority within the Church are both vexed questions for Anglicanism in general and the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States in particular. On 11 February 1989, we entered what the 1988 Lambeth Conference terms 'impaired communion.'[2] It is far from clear what this means either practically or theologically. The extraordinary situation forces us to ask just where our unity lies.

This question is also of the greatest practical importance for those in the Episcopal Church who cannot accept that the ministry of women bishops is Scriptural. All such people find themselves needing to make some provision for their ecclesiastical situation. For on the one hand, if they do nothing, they will eventually if not immediately compromise their principles. On the other hand, schism is distasteful, costly, and something to be avoided.[3] Moreover, the practical difficulties of the Continuing Church movement are a witness against the option of leaving in order to maintain the purity of one's practice. Schism in the interest of absolute purity is like eating peanuts: once you start, it is hard to stop.

The question of unity is bound up with the question of authority. Virtually everyone agrees that Anglicanism is beset with problems of authority. Lambeth concerned itself with questions of authority within the Communion. Bishop Browning, the Presiding Bishop of P.E.C.U.S.A., devoted his December (1988) clergy newsletter *I.2.4.(b)* to the subject. The Bishops of the Anglican Catholic Churches of Canada, Australia and the U.S.A., which are Continuing Churches, have moved for the establishment of a Continuing Anglican Communion to 'resolve the problem of Authority which has led to chaos and increasingly rapid disintegration in what has up to now been styled the "Anglican Communion."' [Press Release, 21/11/88] Even the left wing of P.E.C.U.S.A. admits that there is an authority problem—though for them it is that the institution allows people to remain in more or less good standing while opposing their agenda.

Institutional Authority or Christ's Authority?

The authority question is not whether there is a problem but where the problem lies. Is it with the institutional structure of the Episcopal Church or the Anglican Communion? This seems to be the thought of many, who would alter the worldwide or domestic structures: as with suggestions that we strengthen the triennial Primates' Meetings or

the Anglican Consultative Council. The same position seems to lie behind the Continuing Church schemes for healing their post-1977 splits. The alternative to this view is that the authority problem is not so much an institutional problem as one of the authority of Christ over His Church.

The history of church institutions is bound to make us dubious that a perfect structure exists. For all institutional structures—Anglican and otherwise—seem to have had some failing. A brief look at the Episcopal Church will reveal the root of our problem.

The Episcopal Church in the United States (and Anglicanism generally) has been characterized by a fairly weak institutional structure. When our structures were set after the Revolution, practical power was distributed. Rectors were tenured, and vestries were given power over appointments and property, leaving bishops without much real power other than moral.

Moreover, the Presiding Bishop, being merely the senior bishop, was not intended to have any special power or authority. This last was changed in the present century to allow for the development of a central bureaucracy, as we now have.

Unity and Restraint

This relatively weak institution stands in marked contrast to the Roman Church, for example, where a strong institution could stand considerable abuse from its members and still remain intact. (Only now is the limit in sight for the Romans in the United States.) The Episcopal Church, by contrast, has always recognized that in its weakness the institution was susceptible to being blown apart if one or more of the principal parties within it chose to pursue its agenda at all costs. Thus a certain restraint was required by the major parties. Their respect for the institution meant that they would not push their particular interests to the point where the unity of the body would be imperilled. This situation obtained until the present generation. The debate on the ordination of women to the priesthood at the 1976 General Convention made it clear that if the pro- forces did not obtain what they wanted, they were willing to sacrifice the institution (as evidenced by the illegal 'ordination' of the eleven women to the priesthood in Philadelphia in 1974). By then the mutual restraint was gone.

The danger inherent in a weak institution is that it may be blown apart. But there is blessing as well as danger in such a situation. A fragile institution means that the unity of the Church is practically as well as theoretically guaranteed by Christ Himself. Since the institution is too weak to guarantee unity by itself, we are thrown back on Christ. In every controversy which threatens to blow the Church apart, mutual loyalty to the Saviour is a restraint for all those who

wish to maintain the unity of the Church. Unity is found in Him or it is not found at all.

Thus the weakness of Anglican polity is also its great strength. For it manifests in a very special way that Biblical principle that the root of our unity is our communion with Christ. Through Him we are one with one another. No institution within Anglicanism is strong enough to substitute for that unity. Nor should we wish for one! Thus Anglican polity reflects the Scriptural principles of Church unity more fully than, for example, Roman polity.

Until about twenty years ago the weak institutional structure of the Episcopal Church worked reasonably well. It was dependent for its success on the practice of restraint by all of the various parties within the Church, and especially by the one in power. By restraint, I mean a recognition of a higher authority than the majority in the Church (or General Convention). There has always been a theoretical recognition that Christ was sovereign over His Church, and this was a practical reality as well until somewhere in the late 1960s. There were some matters that General Convention regarded as simply beyond its competence to change or to question, such as the authority of Scripture and the central doctrines of our faith.

The Anglican Church of Canada, for example, enshrines these principles in its Solemn Declaration, which cannot be amended. The Solemn Declaration was adopted when the Anglican Church of Canada became autonomous from the Church of England. It lists the fundamentals of Anglican belief (Scripture, Creeds, Sacraments, communion with the Church of England), and expresses the determination 'by the help of God to hold and maintain the Doctrine, Sacraments, and Discipline of Christ as the Lord hath commanded in his Holy Word, . . . and to transmit the same unimpaired to our posterity.' (Canadian *Book of Common Prayer*, viii) The Solemn Declaration is now ignored (since it cannot be changed), in allowing the ordination of women, among other things. The point is that it acknowledges that there are certain things which cannot be changed by General Synod. General Synod now violates its charter documents by choosing to do as it pleases.

While the American Church lacks such an unchangeable Solemn Declaration, it nevertheless practised the same principle of the authority of God over the Church. The various parties within the Church all recognized Christ's authority. The unity of the Church was based on something greater than their particular party principles. A Church based on party principles would tend to become a sect and not the Church catholic. (In practice, Christ's authority would be irrelevant to such a group, since their unity would be based on agreement about essentially external and nonessential matters.) The parties in the American Church implicitly recognized their need for one another through their recognition of an authority higher than any

of them. Each of course believed that its party interests were true to the teaching of Holy Scripture. But they appealed to this common authority as they attempted to influence others towards the acceptance of their party principles: and the authority provided a limit to their advocacy.

The Prayer Book tradition[4] expresses supremely the true Scriptural unity of the Church. It requires a doctrinal unity in the fundamentals, those essential doctrines of our faith, but allows considerable diversity in everything else. It insists absolutely on the authority of Scripture even over itself, but (in Article XX) accepts that customs and practices may vary from time to time and are rightly under the authority of the national church. It is further clear that as a human institution, the Church is capable of error (and has erred) even in matters of faith (Article XIX)—a comforting observation for our present trials!

The Abandonment of Restraint

So what has happened between the mid-sixties and the present to change all this?

On a practical level, the liberal party in the Church forged a working majority in General Convention. They had (and have) a well defined agenda and they have gradually succeeded in taking control of the institutional structures (especially the national bureaucracy at 815 Second Avenue, New York) in a way that allows them to implement their agenda. The telling move, however, was that they abandoned the principle of restraint. Feeling that their agenda was itself absolute, they abandoned any practical recognition of an authority higher than a majority vote in General Convention. The results of this are increasingly manifest. A seminary dean recently claimed[5] that the 1976 canon permitting the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate and the subsequent House of Bishops' Port Saint Lucie statement (the so-called 'Conscience Clause') permit those rejecting the new ministry to remain in the church—but no more. They are not to refuse the sacramental ministrations of ordained women, nor are they to publicly propagate their position. (His position is not supported by the texts themselves, nor by the debate surrounding them. But the historical facts are ignored.) Dissent from this General Convention decision (itself by the narrowest of margins) is now allowed only in private: public rejection of the decision is 'schismatic.'[6] In practice, the abandonment of restraint and the absolutizing of General Convention mean that the liberal party's car has no brakes: so long as it keeps winning a majority, nothing will stop its use of the institution of the Church for its political agenda.

The result is that the Church is transformed into something that it is not by nature. The Church is not a means to fulfil someone's

political ends. (Was not this our Lord's temptation—all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them?) Insofar as the Church is a means at all it is a means to the sanctity of its members and to heaven. But it is God's means and not ours. Thus, the liberal renunciation of restraint, coupled with their working majority, subverts the essential character of the Church.

On a theological level, the subversion is founded on the renunciation of the authority of Scripture. We have only to look at the seminaries to see whence this has come. Under the influence of a certain sort of critical method, seminarians learn that the meaning of Scripture is either unknowable or irrelevant. Either way, the authority of Scripture is undermined. In the Bishop Pike affair, the House of Bishops committed itself (in fact if not in principle) to the position that there is no enforceable doctrinal discipline for bishops (and thus for everyone) based on Scripture.

The renunciation of the authority of Scripture results in conceiving Church authority entirely in terms of canons and synods. This is clear from the current discussions of the authority of General Convention and of the other structures of worldwide Anglicanism. This discussion makes sense only because the authority of Scripture has ceased to be a practical reality. When there is no common deference to its authority over synods, conventions, bishops, and so forth, then the question of the authority of these human bodies becomes crucial.

In practice, once the sense of deference to the authority of Christ in Scripture is lost, synods and canons lose their authority as well. It is widely recognized, for example, that the Constitution of the Episcopal Church does not permit the ordination of women as bishops, and yet this influences no one when the crucial time comes. Again, the Constitution does not permit 'experimental use' (now become 'supplemental use') as was proposed for the inclusive language (read: radical feminist) liturgies by the Standing Liturgical Commission at General Convention in 1988. The Commission knew this; it was pointed out in the church press. Yet the very illegality of it seems to have had virtually no part in Convention's action.[7] In short, once restraint is abandoned, the only relevant authority is majority vote in convention.

Once the authority of Christ in the Church is lost, unity is the next casualty. When conventions lose their basis in the common commitment to the Lordship of Christ, Christ ceases to have any practical authority over them. Without the acknowledgement of the individual members of convention that their proceedings are subject to Scripture and to Christ's authority, there is then no longer any meaning to unity in Christ. The basis of unity shifts from the oneness of the redeemed with each other through their union with Christ to some idea of institutional unity. We now see unity defined exclusively as

being in communion with General Convention, or with the Presiding Bishop, or with the Archbishop of Canterbury.

This degradation is complicated by the doctrinal shift displacing redemption from sin by the Cross as the central meaning of Christianity. Christianity becomes salvation by social action, supported by a perverse 'incarnational theology' which tends to be simply an affirmation of the material world. Both the loss of restraint and the rejection of the Cross contribute to the loss of Christ as the centre of our unity and the replacement of Christ with some institutional answer.

Moreover, we are left with no basis upon which to question a majority decision of General Convention (Articles XIX and XXI notwithstanding). Many of our bishops clearly regard that as the final and only relevant authority. This means, however, that the Church is no longer understood as the Church but as a sect. It recognizes no responsibility to anyone beyond itself. It has no essential unity with Christ which could be the foundation of its catholicity and therefore accepts its character as an essentially local or national sect. Its identity, and thus its unity, is defined by General Convention and the bureaucracy.

Towards a Solution

So where do we find the solution for this?

First, we do *not* find the solution in trying to design perfect institutional structures. This is in the first place a waste of effort. No institutional structure will maintain the fundamental unity in Christ unless the faithful who practise the administration of the Church also practise deference to Scriptural authority. In other words, without Christian restraint, no institutional structure will guarantee a Church fully obedient to Christ.

Moreover, the preoccupation with institutional structures accompanies a preoccupation with purity. Anglo-Catholics, for example, will try to establish a structure which safeguards Episcopal authority (and rigid conformity in Catholic ceremonial) as the basis for avoiding all of the obvious pitfalls into which the Episcopal Church has fallen. Such is doomed to fail: the foundation is misplaced. The true foundation of Christ as revealed in Scripture is overlaid with non-essentials now elevated to the level of requirements. Unfortunately, some of the Continuing Churches have on occasion fallen into exactly this error.

More seriously, concentrating on the reformation of the structure masks the fundamental problem. We can revise canons until the Kingdom comes and not reach any closer to reforming the Church. We must see that the authority problem is not fundamentally with the structure but with our individual and corporate submission to the authority of Christ. Attention given to the former inevitably distracts

from the latter. Preoccupation with structures cannot but be a ploy of Satan's to keep us from seeing the real problem.

Any solution must be founded on Christian restraint. This means that we must practise our submission to the authority of Christ in Scripture in all things. Our synods and councils must recognize practically that they are not final authorities and that they are susceptible to error. Where differences arise, the acknowledged authority for settling them must be Scripture. In this way the authority of Christ over us can function practically. We must distinguish between essentials and non-essentials and be ready to accept diversity in the non-essentials. (The hard part, of course, is to tell which is which. Accepting that there is a distinction, and that Scripture is the standard for making the distinction, is sufficient for beginning). Anglo-Catholics need Evangelicals and *vice versa* if we are to be the Church and not a sect. So long as there is agreement in the fundamental doctrines, there can be considerable diversity in how these are practised. Diversity is not the problem, as 'purists' are tempted to think, so long as it is diversity in non-essentials. The fact of our diversity allows us to see our unity in Christ and not in some enforced, external uniformity. The latter is clearly contrary to Anglican principles and (it can be argued, at least) contrary to Scripture. Without such diversities the temptation is probably irresistible to establish a man-made unity in the institutional practices and structures, rather than seeking the God-given unity in Christ.

This is not to offer a guarantee that any body founded on a common commitment to the authority of Christ will not later falter because individual members lose sight of that commitment. The fact that this *has* happened has brought us to our current crisis. But if a church body strives to remember the lesson taught by the painful and regrettable experience of the present generation, it will be less prone to repeat the mistake.

Similarly, this is not to say that no changes are needed in our institutional structures. The institutions undoubtedly need to be reformed and certainly need to be revivified. But any reform needs to be based on God's authority; and that means unqualified acceptance of the authority of Scripture.

This, then, is the way forward for Anglicans: one in which there is agreement in essentials, the acceptance of diversity in non-essentials, and a general pattern of Christian charity. The unity to be found in such a Church is the unity which God gives it. It must be accepted as God's gift and discovered and practised within the Church. But, as with all of our Christian virtue, it is not man-made. It is not something that we construct, whether on a national level or a diocesan level or even a local level.

The newly established Episcopal Synod of America (begun at the Synod sponsored by the Evangelical and Catholic Mission June 1–3,

1989 in Fort Worth, Texas) could do exactly this: give us one more human scheme of institutional reform. To do more (and to do what is needed), it will need a spirit not very evident recently: the spirit of human weakness seeking to be filled with the power of God. The June meeting was remarkable in its desire, stated by all of the scheduled speakers and many of the delegates, to return to the full authority of Holy Scripture as the foundation for all its work. By thus recognizing its limitations the Synod has a chance of success. If on the other hand it forgets this beginning and imitates the pretension to omnicompetence of recent General Conventions, it is doomed. It must begin and end with its submission to the authority of Christ in Scripture—and celebrate its inability to do anything outside that authority.

The problem is not essentially an institutional one, but a spiritual problem with institutional ramifications. The problem of authority within Anglicanism will most certainly not be resolved by the formation of a Continuing Anglican Communion, nor by strengthening the rôle of the Anglican Consultative Council, nor by making the Archbishop of Canterbury more like the Pope. Such changes may help the goal of a Church wholly submitted to Christ or they may hinder it. But what they are likely to do is keep us from tackling the real problem: the authority of Christ in His Church, through His Word written. If any response to our current trials is to be successful, it must be based on a renewed and practical submission to the authority of Christ.

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NOTES

1 This article originally appeared in 'The Christian Challenge', March, 1989. Some revisions have been made since the original publication.

2 This was originally written before the appearance of the Eames Commission report. Since the Eames Commission did not deal with the substantive issues, but tried to find a *modus vivendi* without deciding the basic issues, it adds little to the substantive debate. This puts its members in the position of implicitly denying that there is something of substance at issue. The resulting admonitions to remain 'in communion' even if 'impaired' leave one wondering whether the Reformers were justified (in the Eames Commission understanding of *koinonia*) in breaking with the Pope rather than remaining in 'impaired communion' with him. In short, the Report fails to deal with the problem as it exists: a doctrinal issue and not merely a practical one.

3 There is much loose talk about 'schism' these days, and some clarity is needed. (The Eames Commission has admonished us to speak only of impaired or partial communion and not of schism. Whether this is a positive contribution to our current difficulties—and conceptual clarity—time will tell.) We should distinguish *de facto* schism from *de jure* or institutional schism. If schism involves a breach of communion, then there has been schism within the Episcopal Church since the first women were ordained to the priesthood, *de facto*: not everyone recognizes every

Communion service. This became institutionally manifest (*de jure*) with the beginnings of the Continuing Church movement outside the structure of P.E.C.U.S.A. The *de facto* schism remains within P.E.C.U.S.A. contrary to what is said by those who claim that schism will only come into being when (if) an institutional split is made.

There is also schism (*de jure*) within the Continuing Church movement. Some of these bodies at least give the impression that they are fundamentally after purity in non-essentials (canons and liturgical matters and so on)—and that they are willing to divide on these grounds. Thus they become unattractive to many otherwise sympathetic people, because they have given up the attempt to be the Church and instead have settled for being a sect. The difficulty, of course, is to distinguish what is essential from what is not!

Assigning responsibility for existing schisms is another matter. The root of the problem surely lies with those who renounced the authority of revelation in the first place. Since they hold institutional power within P.E.C.U.S.A. they put the onus of schism on those who disagree with them. They are wrong: the breach of communion was created by the unbiblical and unapostolic order, not by those who are faithful to Scripture and the historic ministry. Only those who define schism solely in institutional terms will accept the claim that the Episcopal Synod of America (see below) 'threatens schism'. Institutional disunity is but one aspect of schism, and not in this case even the primary one.

Thus we face three kinds of schism. First, there is the prospect that the Episcopal Synod of America will separate in some way from P.E.C.U.S.A. either by being thrown out or by mutual agreement. Such separation would be *de jure* schism, and as such the prospect is distasteful to traditionalists still within P.E.C.U.S.A.—perhaps necessary and inevitable, but still distasteful. A second kind of schism is the *de facto* schism which now afflicts P.E.C.U.S.A., and which could be the basis for a future institutional realignment. The third kind of schism is worse because unnecessary in principle, (and also the responsibility of traditionalists): the institutional divisions within the Continuing Church movement in quest of purity in non-essentials.

4 I leave aside the question of whether the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* stands fully within the Prayer Book tradition. As I use the term, this tradition includes Prayer Books through the 1928 American, 1959 Canadian, and 1662 English B.C.P.s.

5 See 'The Christian Challenge,' January, 1988.

6 In a recent (21 November, 1989) letter to their clergy, the Bishops of Michigan stated that refusing to receive Holy Communion when a woman was the celebrant is 'unacceptable behaviour'.

7 The liturgies were referred to the Bishops' Theology Committee with the direction that a revised version be published for official 'experimental' use no later than Advent, 1989. The effect is officially to endorse liturgical forms (mainly Eucharist and Daily Office) of controversial doctrinal content without the texts being publicly circulated beforehand. See the 'Anglican Free Press', Summer, 1989, for a discussion of these forms' radical renunciation of the authority of Scripture.