

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_anvil\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php)

# *Reflections on An Open Letter: Some ARCIC Points in Context*

G. R. EVANS

The recently published *Open Letter to the Anglican Episcopate*<sup>1</sup> from the Executive Committee of the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion expresses goodwill towards the work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commissions, but it voices a few remaining difficulties. These are important because they arise from a profound concern that the deepest truths of our faith should not be in any way compromised. The reformers of the sixteenth century rightly saw as the two great principles the supremacy of Scripture and the sovereignty of Christ. These are two faces of a single truth, for Christ is himself God's Word, but in their application to the questions discussed in the ARCIC texts it is convenient to look at them separately.

## **The supremacy of Scripture**

Two fears linger: that something other than Scripture may be given its unique and decisive place in Christian faith and life and order; and that there may be interpretations of Scripture which misrepresent it.

### *1. Scripture and the record of the working out of Scripture's teaching in the life of the Church*

To say that Scripture is supreme is to recognise that the record of the Church's teaching over the centuries which we loosely call 'tradition' (whether kept by the Church's organs of government or published by individuals), cannot carry an intrinsic authority. Its authority is not its own but that of the Word of God incarnate and self-revealing. There is not, in short, any sense in which such an expression can be regarded as set over against that of Scripture. Its authenticity rests on its consonance with Scripture. Such a record can certainly fail to be a true expression if it contradicts the Biblical intention, or follows it through incompletely, or if it seeks to add to it. But where it does not fail in that way, that record constitutes an account to which Christians may look to help their understanding of Scrip-

---

1 Published by Grove Books, Bramcote, 1988.

ture's meaning, and where they can recognise the mark of their Lord's work and that of the Spirit. (That is what has happened in the case of the Creeds, for example).

## *2. The problem of deciding what is 'consonant' with Scripture*

The ministry of the Word has always been twofold. It has involved both reading Scripture itself and preaching it. Preaching is a means of helping understanding of Scripture's meaning too, but like the 'records' of the Church's life (of which those sermons which have been preserved from the past themselves form part), it remains subservient to Scripture itself. We cannot get away from 'testing' and 'interpreting', and we should not seek to do so, because the Bible is written in a way designed to encourage reflection. That is exactly what the Open Letter is pointing to when it speaks of the need to 'allow the Spirit of God through the Word of God to challenge our inherited beliefs and practices'. This touches upon the 'failure to be a true expression' which we spoke of earlier. There have certainly been such failures in the history of the Church, and the reformers correctly identified a number of them in the sixteenth century. (Cases in point, where the Roman Catholic Church has now reformed its own practice, are the administration of communion in only one kind to the laity and the refusal to allow lay people access to Scripture in their own language). Such perceptions that something has gone wrong have to be voiced by members of the Christian community, pointing to Scripture and calling on other Christians to recognise that what is happening is not agreeable to Scripture. Scripture itself calls attention to them through such expressions of concern on the part of the faithful. They are not always listened to at once. It took some generations for these 'reforming ideas' to gain acceptance in the Roman Catholic Church, for example. Yet if they are right they will always be heard in the end, for the Spirit has authority here to speak to the Churches still, and win them to acknowledge the supremacy of the Word. But even the most honest intention to appeal to Scripture does not in itself constitute a warrant that what is being asserted is Scriptural in the interpretation placed upon it. There is nothing to stop fanatics and war-mongers claiming that the Bible is on their side. The test is of acceptance by the whole community over time that Scripture has been rightly understood and acted upon in the Church's life; it is, in other words, still as it was in the first two centuries, when the inspired documents came to be accepted by the Church as the normative record of the authentic foundation of the faith, God's gift to his people that they may know and embrace his truth by faith. In this 'divine society' (Open Letter B.IV.2) human error is always challenged sooner or later, and what is wrong put right.

In brief, what we have been trying to say is that there is really no need to fear that the supremacy of Scripture can be put at risk in the Church in the end, even if human fallibility has sometimes made it seem endangered for a time; or to look at the Church as enshrining a tradition which has an authority other than that of Scripture. That in the Church's past and

present life which is in harmony with the apostolic faith is consonant with Scripture and has Scripture's authority. That which has failed to be right with Scripture is in no way authoritative and will not stand. As we consciously and carefully test what is proposed against Scripture we may do so, then, without anxiety that the Holy Spirit will allow the community of God's people to go fundamentally astray.

### 3. *Putting the right question*

The Open Letter asks whether perhaps the wrong question has been put in connection with the ARCIC statements, whether we should be asking not whether they are 'consonant in substance' with the faith of Anglicans and of the Roman Catholic Church (A.7), but whether they are agreeable to Scripture. There cannot ultimately be a distinction between a 'faith of Anglicans' and the faith of other Christians about the central truths, for as the Open Letter recognises, quoting ARCIC, essential doctrine admits of no divergence (A.4). But within the formal structures of the two Communion it is necessary for each to reach a point where it can declare its acceptance as an ecclesial body of any common statement of a bilateral or multilateral sort, because that is the only way in which such a statement can be built on as we move towards unity. So to speak of a process of separate reception within the separated Communion is in a sense artificial, although for practical reasons it is necessary to treat it as two processes first. It is simply the first question to be asked, and it contains within it implicitly for both sides the deeper question, 'Do you find this agreeable to Scripture?'

## **The Sovereignty of Christ**

### 1. *Atonement*

Christ's atoning work is 'definitive' and 'once-for-all' (B.V.7 and *Salvation and the Church* 27). The authors of the Open Letter would have liked a fuller account of the manner in which this atonement is 'the ground of our justification' (V.7). It may be helpful to say something about that here, because it must also be the foundation of Eucharistic doctrine and to get it right takes us much of the way towards the resolution of long-standing differences over both justification and 'sacrifice' and 'memorial' in the Eucharist.

Christ was himself the victim in the one sufficient sacrifice of himself once offered which he made on the Cross. When we say that that sacrifice atoned we mean that what was offered, perfect humanity in perfect obedience and willing love, was enough and immeasurably more than enough. It was an offering with all possible merit. We also mean that it had an effect in changing once and for all the relationship between God and mankind, on behalf of whom it was made. The language in which that 'effect' is spoken of in Scripture and in the sixteenth century debates is that of Old Testament sacrifice. That is to say, it turns on the idea of placating the just anger of a God to whom sin is intolerable, of expiating that sin by

making up for it (quantitatively) with a greater good given in its place. Just as it is clear that the notion of a divine 'anger' has to be understood as the best human language could do to express a mystery beyond our understanding (for there was also a clear recognition of the action of divine love and mercy in all this), so the concepts of 'paying a price', repaying a debt to God's honour, and so on, must be understood as only partial and imperfect attempts to explain the way in which Christ's death changed things. Talk of 'merits' and of 'sufficiency' belongs in the arena of a quantitative view of what had to be done about the problem of sin. It is important to recognise the assumption which is being made here, because it is exactly the assumption on which penitential practice had long been based: that the penalty for sin is measurable and can in some way be discharged by measurable means. Christ's work was seen in the sixteenth century as infinitely sufficient against the background of a finite-minded accounting procedure for dealing with sin.

## 2. *Personal salvation*

It is impossible for God to ignore sin because that would be a denial of his very nature. Yet he accepts sinful men and women as justified because Christ has given on our behalf the perfect loving obedience we could not. Whatever meaning we want to give to the language of sacrifice and propitiation this seems to be the heart of the matter. Those so 'justified' are sinless in God's eyes. The Open Letter suggests that there was a 'specially deep disagreement' in the sixteenth century as to whether this 'righteousness' on the basis of which God justifies us, is outside us (being Christ's) or inside us (being ours) (B.V.6). That was not really the case. The 'imparted' righteousness which Roman Catholics believed Christians had was not regarded as their own, but as Christ's.

That has implications for the relationship between the justification which transforms our standing before God at a stroke and the process of growth in holiness, or 'sanctification' which takes place gradually as a long-term making of the person whole (V.5). The reformers of the sixteenth century were anxious to avoid any theology which made human goodness a means of earning salvation, because that would be to deny our helplessness in the face of sin and our absolute dependence on God's gracious work of rescue in Christ. They did not wish to deny that the justified could, through grace, become better people. But this they saw as an effect, not a cause, of their justification. Justification is pure unmerited gift to the sinner. The question raised by the Open Letter as still not resolved to everyone's satisfaction is whether we need to insist, in order to preserve Christ's sovereignty, that righteousness remains 'outside us' because it is Christ's, even when we are united with him by faith. Everything turns, as the Canons of the Council of Trent (VI, Canon 32) put it, on the way in which God's gift is given. If the gift of justification makes the faithful 'living members' of Christ then, 'by grace' and 'through his merit' their good actions may be seen as partaking of the character of their Lord's. That is not

to make them 'their's' but his; at the same time, the manner of the gift is exactly what makes it possible for the individual to grow in holiness. Grace and Christ do not remain outside the justified.

That would seem to be the deep meaning of saying, as the Open Letter does, that faith is trust and 'its value located in its object, Jesus Christ' (V.4). That is to say, faith is indispensable for justification because it brings believers into relationship with the sole source of their help which is a uniting and participating, a 'becoming Christ's'.

### 3. *The Eucharist*

The difficulties over the Eucharist to which ARCIC addressed itself had to do with the underlying question of Christ's sovereignty too. ARCIC says, and the Open Letter welcomes the statement, that 'Christ's sacrificial death was perfect, and cannot be repeated or added to' (B.I.1). But it is important to be aware that in the sixteenth century debates another anxiety stood behind that, which accounts for the inclusion of concerns about the way in which Christ is 'really present' at the Eucharist. The early reformers were concerned that contemporary practice made many of the faithful believe that the ordained ministry had special personal powers to 'sacrifice', both to 'make' the body of Christ and the blood of Christ by saying the prayer of consecration in the Eucharist and to 'offer' Christ to the Father for the sins of the people. That not only seemed to them to diminish the completeness and sufficiency of Christ's atoning work, but also to put a human 'priest' in his place. There was deep resentment of such arrogance and a strong reaction against having 'priests' at all. There were other reasons for anticlericalism, and in fact its history goes back well into the twelfth century, long before it had come to focus on the idea of 'sacrifice'. But the problem we still have to resolve is that 'in these areas of eucharistic sacrifice and priesthood . . . full agreement continues to elude us' (B.II.5). If we can reach such agreement, many of the problems about reconciliation of ministries which prevent full visible unity and communion can begin to be solved.

Neither side in the sixteenth century debates completely settled to its own satisfaction the relationship of the Last Supper to the Passion and to the Eucharist. Jesus clearly made the connection in his words, 'This is my body' and 'This is my blood', and so on, and in instructing the disciples to 'do this in remembrance of me'. He also set the *anamnesis* or 'memorial' in the context of a shared meal, in which all present participated with him. He gave his body and blood both to the disciples and 'for' the disciples to his Father, and the offering to his Father was of blood 'shed'. In some sense the body and blood he gave the disciples to eat and drink 'were' his actual body and blood, for he said 'This is my body', 'This is my blood'. We know from Jesus' own words at least this much about the interdependence of the Last Supper, the Passion and the Eucharist.

*Anamnesis* is the key word in all that Jesus said at the Last Supper. ARCIC sees it as expressing the way 'in which the once-for-all event of salvation becomes effective in the present through the action of the Holy Spirit' (E,

Elucidation 5). That is to say, the 'memorial' or 'remembrance' is not just a recollection. It is certainly not a repetition of the Passion, but it is, and Jesus intended it to be, a repetition of his actions in the Last Supper. There is a shared meal in which all participate with him. We receive his gift of himself again, and he is present with us in the Supper, 'personally and objectively . . . ready to give himself to his people', as the Open Letter puts it (B.I.5). But that gift of himself to the disciples was inseparable in his own words from the gift he was making to the Father 'for' the disciples ('given for you . . .'). Scripture does not allow us to separate the two. When we receive what he gave us we are participating in his self-offering through the very gift he made us of himself. His self-offering was simultaneously to the Father for our redemption and to us, that we might share in its benefits. That is part of what is meant by 'making present and effective' in the *anamnesis* of the Eucharist.

Christ chose to celebrate the Last Supper with his disciples before his death, and not after his resurrection. That would seem to indicate that the uniqueness of his sacrifice, historical and temporal though it was, was already present and effective at the Last Supper. That is to say, he could say, 'This is my body which is given for you,' with the full weight of the implications for salvation which those words carry, before his death as they are said now after it. That is not to say that the Last Supper and the Passion did not need to take place in history. It is of the essence of Christ's coming in time and in human history that he should make such incarnate entry into our world of events. But it must be the case that the 'effectiveness' of his death, and its application to human need, are as eternal as they are all-sufficient. They are once-and-for-all, but not over and done with. That is the deep meaning of the sacramental celebration of the Eucharist, and the mode of its 'making present and effective'. We do now, in remembrance of him, what he taught us to do, and as we do so, 'now' becomes 'then' and 'always'.

The Open Letter raises the question of the part we play in all this. 'The distinction between Christ's sacrifice and ours must be preserved' (B.I.4). The Letter sees the distinction in terms of divine initiative and human response, that is, the 'atoning' sacrifice which Christ alone could make, and the 'eucharistic' or 'thanksgiving' sacrifice which we can make in response (B.I.4). Several of the Roman Catholic theologians in the sixteenth century debates pointed out that we have nothing of our own to give. Even our thanks are offered only by the grace of God. If that is right, our 'eucharist' or thanksgiving is one of the things which can happen only when Christ's unique sacrifice is made present and effective because it is one of the 'effects' of his atonement. On this understanding of the inseparability of the two 'sacrifices' the difference of action between offering ourselves 'like Christ, through Christ and in response to Christ' and 'in him or with him' (B.I.4) would seem to disappear. 'That is not to say that the one is identical with the other, but that the one cannot be without the other'.

All this has some bearing on the mode of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. The Open Letter expresses two difficulties here: first with the idea that there is any substantial change in the bread and wine after conse-

cration, and secondly with the view that the presence of Christ is in the 'sacrament' rather than the worthy 'receiver'.

The first concern arose in the sixteenth century (though not in earlier centuries when it had been equally hotly debated as scientifically impossible), out of a resistance to the idea that ordained ministers had power to 'make' Christ. The ARCIC Elucidation (6) adds a word of clarification which explains that a 'substantial' change does not mean a physical change from bread to flesh, but a change in 'inner reality'. The Open Letter argues that that is really saying the same thing. But 'reality' is something more than 'substance'. Christ's presence is not limited to the consecrated elements (ARCIC E Elucidation (6)), but before the consecration of the bread and wine he is not present in the same way as we believe him to be afterwards. The bread and wine are central in some manner which all Christians see as crucial in the celebration of the Eucharist.

The authors of the Open Letter suggest that we may see the change as one of 'dignity'. But in quoting Hugh Latimer here they do not perhaps allow for the full weight of the word *dignitas* in Latin, which was certainly in Latimer's mind. It has the sense of 'worth' or 'value' or 'merit' as well as 'honour', and therefore carries at least as profound a set of implications as such phrases as 'inner reality' and 'truly the body of Christ' (ARCIC's phrases). The truth is that we are in the presence of a mystery, and all attempts to find exact language to describe it must founder either on the rocks of the pseudo-scientific, which was the failing of the mediaeval endeavour to encapsulate it in the terms of Aristotle's physics and metaphysics, or on other rocks in the waters of talk of sign and symbol and metaphor.

The second of the Open Letter's particular difficulties with the ARCIC text concerns this question of 'signification'. Some sixteenth century reformers (and it should be stressed that Luther was not among them) wanted to say that the body and blood of Christ were present only to those who received them in faith and with a pure heart, the president who consecrated the bread and wine did no more than invest them with significance (a notion discussed by Cranmer, Ridley and Jerwel among others). But a physical receiving was seen by the same reformers as essential, because they were equally anxious to resist any idea that the consecrated elements could benefit those who were not present (as in the practice of saying Masses for the dead).

We need now to try to get clear of the complex of sixteenth century concerns which pushed doctrine on both sides into a pattern of 'either' and 'or'. The Eucharist cannot be solely for the benefit of an individual, either as 'applied' for his needs or as 'received' by perhaps only one individual present who is truly able to feed on him in the heart by faith. It is always a corporate act, in which the whole community of Christ's people is mysteriously joined with their Lord. The consecration of the elements 'makes' the Eucharist in the sense that without it there can be no eucharistic communion, but Christ's presence is thereby made possible in a manner incomparably more deeply interfused in the whole celebration, so that he is



equally 'in' the bread and wine and 'in' the worthy receiver (B.I.5). The mode of his presence is one of participation and sharing and that means that he is 'there' for the whole Church, redeeming and sanctifying, making effectually present his one sufficient sacrifice.

#### *4. Ministry and Ordination*

The Open Letter voices two disquiets, both of which arose in the sixteenth century out of the resentment of clerical claims to special personal powers and privileges. The first is to do with the proper recognition of the ministry of the laity. It is not the case (B.II.2) that the ministry of the laity is overlooked by ARCIC. The ARCIC text places the discussion of particular questions about the nature and purpose of the ordained ministry in the context of the ministry of the whole people of God. But its primary concern is with such questions, because they have been the divisive ones. The second concerns the 'priesthood' of the ordained ministry, especially in connection with eucharistic sacrifice (B.II.5). The Open Letter stresses, rightly, that 'no special priesthood attaches to ordained ministers, which is not also shared by the laity' (B.II.3). The priesthood of all believers, a notion acceptable to the majority of the reformers, and pressed by them as fundamental to the idea of commissioning of all the people of God for ministry, is a collective sharing in the priesthood of Christ. The ordained minister participates in that common priesthood. But he is commissioned to perform tasks which must be done as actions of representing and focussing the life and worship of the community. He is the instrument of the community's acting as one. That is what is meant by saying that the priesthood of the ordained ministry 'belongs to (not 'derives from' B.II.4) another realm of the gifts of the Spirit' (ARCIC M.13). 'Realm' has proved to have been an unfortunate choice of word, because it can seem to imply that the ordained ministry is a distinct 'priesthood' and not integral to the collective priesthood of all believers. The difference lies in the relationship in which the ordained ministry stands to the community, a relationship constituted by representation both ways, that is, in relation to Christ and in relation to the people whom the ordained minister serves. The priesthood of the ordained ministry is so much not a private possession of special powers that it cannot exist or operate at all apart from the community. Unless it is representative and focal it does not fulfil its office. It is an 'order' primarily because it is part of the ordering and harmony of the Church's life.

The concept of priesthood itself is inseparable from the unique reality of Christ's High Priesthood. One of the sixteenth century difficulties was with any implication that human 'priests' could stand alongside him, or even usurp his place, claiming to add to, or complete his sacrifice. We have seen in connection with the Eucharist that this arose out of certain contemporary imbalances and mistaken emphases in the theology of the Eucharist. If we can see the Eucharistic sacrifice in the terms of making present and effective the one sufficient sacrifice of Christ, and the president of the Eucharist as focussing and representing in his actions the participation of the whole people of God with their Lord, there is no reason not to speak on that understanding of a 'priesthood of the ordained ministry'.

### 5. *Authority in the Church*

The theme of authority is of another order than that of Eucharist or ministry or even salvation, because it embraces all three, as well as the two areas on which ARCIC concentrated, and which the Open Letter addresses. It will be some time before it will be possible to come to a common mind on all it implies. The brief comments offered here touch only on aspects of the sovereignty of Christ which the Open Letter mentions in this connection. The key point would seem to be whether the 'human oversight' which is clearly envisaged in Scripture in the 'local Church' (B.IV.2) is helpful to the 'worldwide Church', or whether in that wider Church there can be no head but Christ (B.IV.2). Much depends here on the concept of headship involved. Christ is Lord, and can have no fellow. But the authors of the Open Letter express a willingness to see a 'seniority' which is understood in terms of service (B.IV.4). The essential point here is that such seniority is humble not lordly and that it is pastoral. They are happy to accept such a seniority as expressing 'historical continuity, visible unity, personal affection, brotherly support' (B.IV.4). That is to say, it has the essential elements of 'oversight' as it has been consistently understood in the Church from the beginning. Such a pastor is a person, to whom his flock can respond, rather than a committee. With his brother-officers (who have most usually been called 'bishops'), the leader of the local community joins in bonds of collegial affection and brotherly support so as to present with them a collective focus of visible unity worldwide. Together with their predecessors, they express the historical continuity of the Church's life. Among them, the one who is 'senior' comes 'first' (i.e. is a 'primate') only in the nature of the service he owes. 'Primacy is not an autocratic power over the Church, but a service in and to the Church which is a communion in faith and charity of local churches' (ARCIC A.II. (19)). That is very much what the Open Letter describes in its account of the seniority of the Archbishop of Canterbury. What is technically known as 'universal jurisdiction' is also not an autocratic power, but an exercise within the universal fellowship of 'the jurisdiction necessary for the fulfilment' of the functions of this leadership or seniority, 'the chief of which is to serve the faith and unity of the whole Church' (ARCIC A.II.17). In other words, it is entirely practical, a help to the running of the Church. It can be in no way a usurpation of Christ's own authority, because it is not authority at all if it is not also service of the community which is his body. A primate has no power of his own 'over' the Church, but only an authority which is part of its very life and is exercised within it.

### 6. *Penance, Purgatory, Indulgences, Masses for the dead (B.V.8)*

These topics are grouped by the Open Letter as needing further elucidation. Apart from indulgences, the essential principles of a common faith on these matters are outlined in *Salvation and the Church*. Indulgences were omitted, because the theology of indulgences remains a complex and knotty matter for Roman Catholics as well as protestants, and it is too soon

to be able to say anything useful about it ecumenically. But disquiet about the persistence of certain elements which entered into the system in granting indulgences during the last mediaeval centuries is voiced within the Roman Catholic community, and taken seriously. It may be helpful here to stress that indulgences have nothing to do with forgiveness. They are remission of a punishment imposed for a sin the guilt of which is already forgiven – rather as a parent might make a naughty child do something to show it is sorry, and then let it off when it is obvious that the repentance is real. The sinner is forgiven at once and unconditionally, and the ‘letting off’ is an act of mercy, which relates to the punishment only (cf. *Codex iuris canonici*, 992).

The penitential system (which is distinct from the system of indulgences) depends upon a theology which takes sin seriously. It accepts that original sin is a taint in all human nature, underlying every actual sin we commit, and that fallen human beings are helpless to do anything about their sinning by themselves. It puts all its faith in the atoning work of Christ, as making possible the reconciliation with God which is forgiveness of both actual sin and the original sin of the individual. It stresses the absolute necessity of repentance and faith if that reconciliation is to take place for the individual.

It recognises that many people have, over the centuries, found it a practical help to confess not only to God in their hearts, but also to a fellow-Christian (James 5:16). The normal practice from the earliest times was to bring one’s confession to someone commissioned by the Holy Spirit and the community to offer the repentant sinner the reassurance of God’s forgiveness, and of the community’s continuing welcome. ‘The Church is entrusted by the Lord with authority to pronounce forgiveness in his name to those who have fallen into sin and repent. The Church may also help them to a deeper realisation of the mercy of God by asking for practical amends for what has been done amiss. Such penitential disciplines, and other devotional practices, are not in any way intended to put God under obligation. Rather, they provide a form in which one may more fully embrace the free mercy of God’ (*Salvation and the Church*, 22). The Book of Common Prayer puts it like this: ‘If there be any of you who . . . cannot quiet his own conscience by confessing to God, but requireth further comfort or counsel, let him come to me, or to some other . . . Minister of God’s Word, and open his grief; that by the ministry of God’s holy Word he may receive the benefit of absolution’.<sup>1</sup>

‘The believer’s pilgrimage of faith is lived out with the mutual support of all the people of God. In Christ all the faithful, both living and departed, are bound together in a communion of prayer’ (*Salvation and the Church*, 22). It is this deep unity of the body of Christ, sustained by mutual intercession, on which the doctrine of purgatory and the practice of praying with the saints, or of remembering the dead in intercession in Holy

---

1 See, too, F. Senn, ‘The Confession of Sins in the Reformed Churches’, *Concilium*, 190, (1987), p 105-116.

Communion, all rest. It is obvious to any observer that although the faithful die justified in God's sight, they do not die perfected. That is to say, we all come to the ends of our lives with many faults, and with parts of ourselves still immature. Before we can live as we are intended to do for eternity, at home in God's presence, we need to be changed, to become fully and finally what God created us to be. We do not know how that change takes place. It may be in the 'twinkling of an eye', and yet still be perceived by the person to whom it is happening as a process. Although the Council of Trent, in its Decree on purgatory of 3-4 December, 1563 (Sessio XXV) affirms the principle that the faithful may help those they love who are in purgatory but still within the communion of prayer, it roundly condemns the multitude of popular superstitions and fantasies which have bred around the notion of purgatory.

The question which we need perhaps most urgently to address in connection with penitential practices in Roman Catholic communities is whether they involve a mere difference of style and emphasis in Church life, or whether there is any element, or elements, which are strictly at variance with Scripture. We need to try to come to a common mind here as elsewhere. Perhaps we might take as a starting point the clear principles which lie at the heart of the penitential system, and to which Scripture attests: that the community of the faithful binds us to our neighbours as it does to Christ, and that in the Eucharist the saving work of Christ is made present and effective for those who participate by receiving in faith.

### *Conclusion*

It would not be right to end without a comment on the ecclesiology which was referred to under the heading of 'the problem of deciding what is consonant with Scripture'. It was suggested there that we get ourselves into a false position if we seek to polarize Church and Scripture, and think that the Church can enshrine a tradition which has an authority other than that of Scripture. It may justly be said that in the later Middle Ages the Church in the West sought at certain points to do just that, and that the reformers were right to call a halt. But what happened in the sixteenth century did not stop there. The rule that what failed to be right with Scripture is in no way authoritative and will not stand, has been proved. The Roman Catholic church has put the ministry of the Word in the language of the people in its proper place in its sacramental life, and in a multitude of other ways it has accepted the justice of what the reformers said. It is certainly not now the case that the Church claims an independent authority. We need to go ahead together now in the work of discovering a common mind on matters of faith under Scripture with an equal openness on both sides, without fear and without letting the suspicion and hostility of the sixteenth century linger in our hearts.

**Dr G. R. Evans** is a Fellow of Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge and a member of the Faith and Order Advisory Group (FOAG).