

An Open Letter: Some Comments on a Response

ANDREW KIRK

My first and overwhelming response to G. R. Evans' article is to note its careful, open and eirenic character. She has produced a model of how fellow members of Christ should discuss their different perceptions of the faith – not that, in her case, there seems much to disagree about.

An Open Letter to the Anglican Episcopate was sent to all the bishops of the Anglican Communion some months before the Lambeth Conference (July 1988). Its purpose was to show why in particular instances the ARCIC agreements, important though they were, did not yet constitute the mind of the Anglican Church. Some fairly basic questions (a little more serious than 'a few remaining difficulties' suggests) remain. The Letter expresses both the danger of pressing on to a superficial agreement and the value of gaining a greater understanding of the mystery of the faith by insisting on more detailed work in certain areas. The process of listening carefully to the way other Christians express themselves, which involves the request that they clarify their meanings, should help to eliminate those differences which are based on misunderstandings.

My intention in this short piece is to make a few brief comments on Dr Evans' 'reflections' (*Anvil* Vol. 5, No. 3, 1988) with a view to helping forward the discussion of the ARCIC agenda in some key areas. I will follow the order of her paper, keeping to the two main divisions and the sub-headings. Though part of the original drafting team of the Letter, I speak here in a purely personal capacity.

The supremacy of Scripture

I agree that the supremacy of Scripture and the sovereignty of Christ are the touchstones of God's truth. However, since the controversies of the 16th century, the cultural context of our debates about the content and meaning of the faith has fundamentally changed. Today the fundamental challenge facing the Church is the generally accepted axiom that humanity does not have access to final truth about life and the universe. We breath an atmosphere of historical, cultural and even scientific relativism. Claims to know the truth are dismissed not so much as arrogant self-deception as meaningless. Though the loss of absolutes is more a matter of theory than

practice – it is in reality impossible either to reflect or to live on the basis of consistent relativism – it represents a powerful drift in all ‘westernized’ cultures. Discussion of the nature and mediation of authority, therefore, has to take account of an all-pervading reality (almost an obsession), which also has its numerous devotees within the Churches.

I like the use of the word ‘authenticity’ as applied to tradition. It is a much better word than authority. Tradition is not a source of authority, but a reapplication of the living Word of God in different situations and generations. The reformed principle of *Sola Scriptura* does not intend to play down tradition, whose importance is commensurate with the significance of the situation addressed and the closeness of the subject-matter to the heart of the Gospel, but to highlight the discontinuity between the apostolic reception of the faith and all subsequent interpretations. In this context it is not very helpful (nor accurate) to talk of the New Testament as part of the Church’s tradition, for then all tradition, lacking a separate critical and reforming centre, tends to become inviolate.

One danger of the *Sola Scriptura* principle is that God’s Word is interpreted in anachronistic forms. It should not forbid a legitimate drawing out of the inferences of the written Word which allow and encourage practices and understandings which go beyond the letter of Scripture, whilst not plainly contradicting it. God’s Word is an active, prophetic and pastoral word spoken in order to bring about change. As it is spoken to two sets of audiences, the original and the contemporary, the work of hermeneutics is inevitable. ‘The main purpose of reading and interpreting the Bible is to understand how God’s Word, given specifically and uniquely at one point of time, becomes God’s Word to us today in such a way as to demand obedience’.¹

In the debate about Scripture and tradition ‘catholics’ tend not to distinguish sufficiently rigorously between the apostolic message (contained in its final and finished form in the canonical Scriptures) and all subsequent developments in doctrine and practice. On the other hand, ‘evangelicals’ often refuse to acknowledge that the temporal distance between text and context cannot be bridged by means of mechanically-applied exegetical rules.

Another danger of the *Sola Scriptura* principle is that it can be interpreted as meaning *Sola Conscientia* and be used as an excuse for setting up alternative centres of power and authority. Scripture, however, is not a matter of private interpretation (2 Pet. 1:20). Of course, a principle does not become illegitimate because it is misapplied. Bad use is not corrected by abandoning the principle, but by good use. So, in the use of Scripture and tradition in order to discover the mind of Christ today we have to be careful to avoid false dichotomies. There is the danger of confusing the authority of the text

1 J. A. Kirk, *God’s Word for a Complex World*, Marshall Pickering, Basingstoke 1987, p 97.

with my interpretation of it. Though, perhaps, a characteristically 'evangelical' misunderstanding, it is prevalent among all groups of Christians. There is also the danger, most prominent among those within a 'liberal' tradition, of giving the impression that we are free in the Spirit (who will guide us into all truth) to accept and discard portions of the text which may appear either superficially more or less relevant in a given set of circumstances or more or less acceptable to the 'modern' mind. Such a procedure stifles the otherness and gratuity of God's Word. It makes it ultimately but an echo of our own opinions.

In the light of these various deviations from a sound hermeneutical practice, I am not quite so sanguine as Dr Evans about the exposure of human error within the 'divine society'. Right and wrong exist side by side – often in unlikely places (but let us be careful about throwing the first stones). Hermeneutics is a community task in which we are ready to acknowledge the wisdom of others and slow to claim a monopoly of right understanding (though such cannot be always ruled out of court). There is no easy short cut, either through a magisterium, through a particular view of Scripture, through 'sanctified' reason or through a prophetic message, to hearing what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Though I find the idea of the 'indefectibility' of the Church attractive ('human error is always challenged sooner or later, and what is wrong is put right'), it could be interpreted to mean that those things which do stand (e.g. certain Marian practices) are 'right with Scripture'. Despite some scepticism about indefectibility, it is crucial to point out that the Church usually maintains a considerable distance between what it declares its belief to be and what some maverick theologians and others assert from time to time.

The Sovereignty of Christ

1. Atonement and Personal Salvation

Because of the way in which language has been used it is probably better, in my estimation, to drop altogether the use of non-biblical phrases like 'merit', 'satisfaction' and 'sufficiency' when speaking of Christ's sacrificial death on our behalf. In the interest of trying to establish what is consonant with Scripture, would it not be more profitable to try to explicate the full range of meaning of the extensive biblical imagery used to explain the nature of the atonement, working back from biblical words such as reconciliation, liberation, propitiation/expiation, justification? In this way we will come to see that the New Testament links God's acceptance of sinful men and women not so much to Christ meriting on our behalf what we could not for ourselves, but to his bearing the full judgment (separation from God's presence) against sin. Reaction against the language of merit is due to the fact that historically it has stifled the language of grace.

God's righteousness (Rom. 1:17ff.), as I understand it, is both his act of justifying the guilty sinner and his act of making us new people in Christ. But the second act is not the first. If we are to follow Paul's thinking, it is confusing to juxtapose good works with justification. Good works are the

fruit of a powerful act of salvation coming from God, not action springing out of a supposedly innate goodness arising from the heart of human nature. As far as James is concerned, good works are seen as the demonstration of real faith and obedience, not the cause of God's reckoning anyone righteous. Only a superficial, if not perverse, exegesis of the two authors could find a contradiction, or even a different emphasis, between them. Faith is the only possible response to free grace. Grace ceases to be a spontaneous gift where any kind of merit on the part of the recipient is present.

2. *The Eucharist*

I like the suggestion that perhaps certain understandings of the Eucharist in relation to salvation do have something very significantly to do with the power the Church is supposed to possess to bring people into obedience to the Gospel (Rom. 1:5). Although power is admittedly delegated, for all power belongs exclusively to God and is administered by Christ (Matt. 28:18), it is related in the New Testament to the proclamation of Jesus and the Kingdom in word and deed not to the administration of sacraments. Whatever the context in which the power of the Holy Spirit operates in the Church, claims about its 'institutional' use (in sacramental act, verbal proclamation, prophetic word, healing ministry) need to be made with great caution. The Gospel paradox about power is that the recipient is powerless, whatever the Church's authorisation, to *grasp* and *possess* it.

Another aspect of the controversy over the meaning of the Eucharist has to do with the necessity for and the use of signs and symbols (visible channels of grace) in a person's or community's relationship to God. Differences of belief may have much to do with the way people see the relationship between the natural and supernatural worlds and between the prophetic and priestly elements in religion. This debate has a wider point of reference than that of the Christian faith (Islam, for example, refuses any form of priesthood or iconography).

Much has been written and expressed about the deep significance of the eucharistic actions. Christians of different traditions have to work very hard to hear what others are saying to them. Listening has been vitiated by the perceived need to stick with and defend particular formulas. Are we all open enough to hear what is behind some of the probing questions which others ask us? In my understanding, 'evangelicals' want particularly to press the following questions:

- (i) Is *anamnesis* the key word in all that Jesus said at the Last Supper? Might it not be that in the course of time it has assumed an unwarranted emphasis within the whole narrative because of a misguided interpretation?
- (ii) Is it absolutely certain what the words, 'do this . . .', refer to? Have we become too dogmatic about 'this', where we need to be more agnostic? I would suggest that a univocal equation, which seems to underline some views of change in the elements, cannot do justice to the force of the language.

(iii) How far can the spatial metaphors of 'participating' in or with Christ, or his self-offering, be pressed? Again what is the benefit of talking about Christ in the *elements*? Is the eucharistic action not a conjunction of the elements, prayer, proclamation of the word and the activity of the Holy Spirit? Might it not be, then, that the elements are given overdue weight because they are tangible? If spatial metaphors are to be used, then I think most evangelicals would probably prefer to talk about the 'presence' of Christ in the promises of the word relating to the eucharistic action, rather than in a more localised form.

(iv) What exactly is lost by regarding the bread and the wine strictly as symbols, which to the believing eye of the predisposed have a particular force in bringing us into the centre of the mystery of the atonement, but have no power of salvation? What, for the 'catholic' tradition, is the 'bottom line' in terms of the effect of the act of consecration? Evangelicals are reasonably clear about what they believe cannot be accepted without obscuring the full significance of Jesus Christ. The problem is partly the use of ambiguous language. Can the 'catholic' 'bottom line' please be stated in a way which expresses clearly the non-negotiable convictions? I suspect they have to do with the way in which the once-for-all sacrifice becomes a reality across time. I also have a suspicion that 'catholics' would use the word 'finished' of the work of Christ in a different way from that acceptable to 'evangelicals'.

3. *Ministry, Ordination and Authority*

Posing again my question 'What would be lost if . . .?' should we not, for the sake of clarity, abandon certain 'ontological' terminology about ministry and assess it exclusively in terms of function? There seems to be an inherent ambiguity in using servant language about an authority which is intrinsic and invariable by virtue of ordination, because it is difficult to relate the notion of *self-giving* service to that of a *bestowed* authoritative position in the community. Further, we are not helped much by the comparative lack of practical models. Would it not, then, be helpful to return to the idea of authenticity and measure authority by the missiological test of its fruitfulness? Thus, historic continuity of ministry, to give one example, has value in the fruitfulness of maintaining the unity of God's people.

4. *Penance, Purgatory, Indulgences, Masses for the Dead*

I think the penitential system as understood historically is based on a confusion between penitential practices and seeking the consolation of God's Word. Surely, if grace is genuinely grace there cannot be any question of paying a price; such a notion would be incompatible with being *freely* forgiven. Unfortunately, whatever explanations may be given now, 'paying a price' has been seen historically as 'earning God's favour'. Penitential disciplines are open to great misunderstanding if they are interpreted within the framework of retributive punishment. Again they obscure the nature of unconditional grace and forgiveness. On the other hand, in so far

as we have wronged our neighbours, restitution is an absolutely appropriate, indeed inseparable, part of repentance (Lk. 19:8).

Evangelicals believe that purgatory is a mistaken idea which, failing once more to do justice to the fulness of salvation, arises from the false belief that sinners have to pay some kind of penalty for their misdeeds. Of course, there will still be much to change in the life of all of us as we pass on from this existence, but this change (the New Testament seems to state) will happen in the presence of the triune God not in some separate place.

Experience seems to suggest that the whole range of penitential practices devalues the nature of grace. Systems of this kind in the hands of one part of the Church almost invariably convert faith into a religion which then needs to be regulated institutionally and administered by some on behalf of others. Authenticity in both belief and practice is measured ultimately by the extent of our grasp of the graciousness of God.

The Revd Dr Andrew Kirk, has a ministry of teaching, writing and consultation with Christian Impact and the Church Missionary Society. He is a member of the Faith and Order Advisory Group (FOAG).