

Editorial

The eagerly-awaited Statement and Exposition by the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England has already excited a good deal of comment in both the secular and the ecclesiastical media. This is scarcely surprising, since the document is a rare and welcome contribution from a body which too often can be accused of fudging the issues, standing on the sidelines when great doctrinal debates flare up, or finding short, bland excuses for doing virtually nothing to guide the Church through their intricacies. This time, the furore created by the Bishop of Durham's remarks shortly before his consecration has made such evasive tactics impossible, and this statement is the result of considered episcopal discussion about fundamental Christian doctrines.

The document is therefore *rare*, and not least because it is both detailed and unanimous. A surprisingly large space is given over to considering the formularies of the Church of England, and in particular the Thirty-Nine Articles, which is a welcome reminder that those oft-forgotten paragraphs are still expected to possess some kind of normative authority in our Church. There is also a lengthy discussion of the two main issues in the Durham controversy, the Empty Tomb and the Virgin Birth of Christ, which manages to be both wide-ranging and fairly evenly balanced on matters which have frequently provided enough material to fill several volumes. It cannot have been easy to compress so much into such a short space, and if the style is at times more than a little dense, it is greatly to the bishops' credit that they were prepared to undertake such a thankless task.

Furthermore, as far as the Bishop of Durham's original statements are concerned, the House of Bishops generally dissociates itself from them and certainly from the tactless way in which they were expressed. This is made clear in section 70, though care is of course taken not to name names. Given the spirit of collegiality which the bishops are determined to maintain, and the unanimity with which they signed this statement, that is most encouraging. It is important to bear these positive features in mind, especially since so many people had been expecting little more than a brief whitewash of the whole affair. This has NOT happened, and it is only fair to recognise the fact, particularly when we must be rather critical of the end product.

In their opening statement the House of Bishops declares that 'we are united in our adherence to the apostolic faith'. This sounds marvellous until we realise that the 'apostolic' faith is not the same

thing as the faith of the Apostles! Of course, say the bishops, we owe a great debt to them and to their witness, which remains normative for the Church. But we must also realise that they only *began* to 'explore the imperatives of faith for human living' (section 3); we must carry on where they and their successors left off. In one sense of course, there is nothing objectionable about this, and those inclined to traditional orthodoxy may well interpret it (with the bishops' blessing) in a way which leaves the authority of what the Apostles taught intact. The trouble is that this is not the ONLY way to read such a statement, nor does it appear to be the main sense intended by the majority of the bishops.

The statement upholds both the revealed character of the Christian faith (section 2) and the authority of the Bible, but NOT the belief that the Bible is God's revelation. Recognition is given to those who believe the Bible to be telling the historical truth (section 27) but it is made perfectly clear that this belief, though 'entirely defensible', is not to be recommended to anyone seriously interested in scientific study. The old fallacy which claims that scholarly objectivity demands that one accept the fallibility of the text is repeated afresh and treated as the view which should prevail among academically-minded Church-people. The idea that a manuscript is innocent until proved guilty (which means that its claims to infallibility should be taken seriously until they can be shown to be wrong) is simply never mentioned, although it is an axiom in other branches of ancient literary study.

The bishops give great weight to the belief that historical facts matter, and state that Christianity must be founded on a hard core of fact, even if it can be admitted that legends have crept in here and there. They go over the evidence for the Empty Tomb and demonstrate that it cannot be conclusively disproved. They also admit that the resurrection of Jesus involved the 'whole personality', on the ground that mankind has been recreated in Christ. It all sounds wonderful until we realise that they also draw an untenable distinction between the resurrection (as Jesus' physical rising from the dead) and the Risen Christ, pointing out that witnesses saw the latter but not the former, which remains a 'mystery' (section 32ff.). And at the end of the day, in spite of all their positive noises in favour of the Empty Tomb, the bishops recognise that 'scholarship can offer no conclusive demonstration' of it, which seems to them to be enough justification for the fact that 'the divergent views to be found among scholars of standing are reflected in the thinking of individual bishops' (section 50).

Much the same approach is taken with the narratives relating to the Virgin Birth. They are regarded as plausible enough for those who are inclined to believe them, but equally implausible for those who are not. In the end it is all a matter of 'faith' (section 55) which in this

context means that if someone chooses not to believe it, it does not affect his position as a bishop in good standing in the Church of England. 'Faith' here means no more than personal belief, which may or may not be informed by 'The Faith' as expressed in the Creeds of Christendom (see section 4 for an account of how their authority is relativised).

What all this boils down to in the end is this—the apostolic witness is an invaluable historical resource which continues to be the indispensable starting-point for any Christian theology, but it is *finally* authoritative only for a section of the Church's membership. Evangelical Catholic Orthodoxy is a permissible option which must be respected as the mainline historical tradition of the Church (like the B.C.P.!) but no-one should insist on its use in practice. To put it bluntly, Christianity is fine for those who like it, but nobody should ever be allowed to limit the Church of England to it!

In the end, the real questions posed by this document are not Christological (as it seems on the surface) but ecclesiological. Where does the Church's authority lie? What is the teaching office of a bishop and how should bishops be appointed? (The statement does not go into this!) Above all, should a Church which is historically 'national', like the Church of England, be expected to include in its membership scholarly men of good will and general Christian sentiment, even if they do not actually assent to the Church's official teaching? One of the great glories of the Reformation was its insistence that the Church would henceforth preach the pure Word of God and discipline its clergy according to the precepts of sound doctrine. As Canon C 18.1 (quoted in section 72 of the Statement) adds, it is also a bishop's duty 'to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange opinions'. Can someone please tell us how this Canon still applies when such opinions have taken root among the bishops themselves?

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