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Pedlar, James E. "Episcopacy and the Sovereignty of the Spirit: ARCIC on Authority as a Response to Miroslav Volf." *Ecumenical Trends* 38, no.11 (2009): 6-9.

Episcopacy and the Sovereignty of the Spirit: ARCIC on Authority as a Response to Miroslav Volf

By James E. Pedlar

One of the major challenges in the contemporary Church is the relative lack of participation in ecumenical dialogue by the evangelical traditions. Episcopal authority presents a particularly pressing obstacle to evangelical engagement in the ecumenical movement, because many evangelical traditions are explicitly opposed to episcopal models of church government, while the Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican churches (with variations and differing emphases, of course) view episcopal structures as both essential to the *esse* of the Church, and necessary for the Church's visible unity. Miroslav Volf has been a particularly able spokesperson for free church concerns, and his 1998 book *After Our Likeness* remains the most sustained theological account of free church ecclesiology published in recent years. Volf gives theological clarity to common evangelical objections to episcopal government, arguing that episcopacy impinges on the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit, and does not adequately reflect the nature of trinitarian relations. In this paper I will briefly outline Volf's concerns regarding episcopal authority, and then demonstrate how the consensus on authority reached by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission can provide a credible answer to Volf's pneumatological concerns. Episcopacy, properly conceived, need not be seen as an encroachment on the freedom and sovereignty of the Spirit, and thus need not be rejected by free church evangelicals.

Volf's critique of episcopal authority comes in the context of his attempt to provide a thoroughly trinitarian ecclesiology from a free church perspective. In relation to the unity of the Church, Volf believes that a specifically trinitarian principle of unity must be sought.¹ He is keen to show how relations in the church can be modeled on trinitarian relations, and yet also to indicate the limits of such correspondence.² For Volf such relational correspondence exists only in terms of relations *within* a congregation, because relations *between* congregations are transient and merely historical on this side of the eschaton.³ Writing from the perspective of the so-called social model of trinitarian relations,⁴ Volf argues that trinitarian relations must be seen as *polycentric* and *reciprocal*, that is, without any sense of subordination, whether it be a subordination of persons to substance (Volf's reading of Catholic theology), or of the Son and Spirit to the Father as sole source (Volf's reading of Orthodox theology).⁵ Volf's assertion that the *relations* in the Christian community ought to correspond to

trinitarian relations leads him to argue that "every ecclesial unity held together by a mon-archy, by a 'one-[man!]-rule,' is monistic and thus also un-trinitarian."⁶

Volf argues that the unity of the church cannot be based upon a particular office, but can only be established by God, who distributes charismatic gifts to *all* the members of the church. The various gifts correspond to trinitarian multiplicity, while the fact that they are distributed for the benefit of the entire community corresponds to the divine unity.⁷ In the New Testament, "the unity of the church seems especially to come about through the indwelling of the *one Spirit* (and with it of the entire holy trinity) *in every person*."⁸ An episcopal structure, according to Volf, is problematic because it would seem to represent an attempt by one member of the community to monopolize the leading of the Spirit, which is shared by all believers.⁹

After Our Likeness is written as a sustained engagement with the theologies of Joseph Ratzinger and John Zizioulas, and Volf argues that each of them in his own way presents the episcopal office as a kind of guarantee of the Spirit's guidance. Speaking of Ratzinger's position, Volf writes, "Because the Holy Spirit is bound to these officeholders, they are able to function with spiritual authority in the church and to interpret in a binding fashion the word of God. They guarantee that people in the church are dealing with God rather than merely with themselves."¹⁰ Zizioulas, while placing greater emphasis on the role of the laity in reception, nevertheless places the bishop in an "emphatically asymmetrical" relationship over the laity, for it is the entire local Church "including its fixed structure" that "guarantees that God is acting within it; only what the bishop (in communion with other bishops) decides *and* what the local church (in communion with other local churches) receives derives from the spirit of truth."¹¹ Volf is clear that the work of the Spirit is indeed enduring in relation to particular persons, but emphatically rejects any attempt to formalize this bond in the form of church law.¹²

Such formalization would first of all negate the sovereignty of the Spirit, since such law would have to presuppose the Spirit of God "as a calculable element." Second, one could not clearly differentiate between the action of the church and that of Christ; one could easily mistake the Spirit of God for the Spirit of the church. Third, any legal formalization of spiritual activity would result in a false liberation of people; formal certainty that in the actions of others one is actually encountering God would come at the price of one's own freedom of faith, since church law can provide religious certainty only by tethering religious life.¹³

Rather than such tethered certainty, Volf argues for a continual process of discernment in every circumstance, including the actions of those in ecclesial authority. In other words, "we cannot specify in advance where and how the Spirit will act."¹⁴ Roles assigned to

continued on page 7

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specific individuals in the church, while made in anticipation of future gifting by the Spirit, must always be provisional.¹⁵ This includes ordained ministry, which must be interpreted as “a public reception of a charisma given by God and focused on the local church as a whole.”¹⁶ In this context, the episcopal model of ordination is an affront to the sovereignty of the Spirit because of a presumption as to how and through whom the Spirit of God is going to act.¹⁷ In short, the unity of the Church must be the responsibility of the whole people of God, all of whom are indwelt by the Spirit, and locating unity in a single person undermines the sovereignty of that Spirit.¹⁸

While there may be accounts of episcopal authority that give credence to Volf’s concerns, recent ecumenical discussion on authority provides us with a way to move past these concerns without rejecting episcopal structures. The consensus on episcopal authority reached by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) provides an example of how episcopal authority can be presented in such a way as to answer the concerns that Volf has raised about the sovereignty of the Spirit in the life of all believers. That is, the consensus of ARCIC shows that episcopal authority need not be viewed as the monopolization of the Spirit’s leading by one person, nor as a guarantee which presumes upon the Spirit’s actions.

First, ARCIC interprets episcopal authority *communally*. In ARCIC’s first agreed statement on authority, the document begins with the assertion that the foundation of Christian authority is the Spirit’s indwelling of the community (not simply the Spirit’s indwelling of its leaders). Through the Spirit, the community has been enabled to live a life faithful to the gospel, and has been given “the capacity to assess its faith and life and to speak to the world in the name of Christ.”¹⁹ ARCIC is clear that each of the members of the church is enabled by the Spirit to mediate Christ’s authoritative word to the world, and therefore each of the members is also responsible for this task.²⁰ Thus, though ARCIC does go on to speak of “special gifts for the benefit of the Church” which include the gift of *episcopate*,²¹ this is followed immediately by the assertion that the “perception of God’s will for his Church does not belong only to the ordained ministry but is shared by all its members.”²² Further, the need for special gifts of the Spirit for *episcopate* is occasioned precisely by the fact that the Spirit *does* speak to all believers!

All who live faithfully within the *koinonia* may become sensitive to the Spirit and be brought towards a deeper understanding of the Gospel and its implications in diverse cultures and changing situations. Ordained ministers commissioned to discern these insights and give authoritative expression to them, are part of the community, sharing its quest for understanding the Gospel in obedience to Christ and receptive to the needs and concerns of all.²³

The fact that all are responsible for the church’s mission, and all may be led to deeper insights concerning the gospel, means that the need for authoritative discernment will inevitably arise, as various (and possibly contesting) insights arise from among the faithful. For ARCIC, episcopal authority is intended as just such a ministry of discernment, to safeguard the gospel as the Spirit speaks to the entire community in various contexts.²⁴

Further, this ministry of discernment is not to be blindly accepted by the community, nor are they to presume in all situations that

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the Holy Spirit has acted through those with the gift of *episcopate*. They are called to respond to the authoritative expression of the gospel provided by those in authority and assess their teaching. Thus, according to ARCIC, it is not through a monopoly of the Spirit by bishops or other ordained ministers, but through a continual process of discernment by the ordained *and assessment by the faithful* that the Spirit declares Christ’s authority in the community.²⁵ ARCIC is very careful to note the way in which the human authorities in the Church “cannot adequately reflect Christ’s authority because they are still subject to the limitations and sinfulness of human nature.”²⁶ While Volf was concerned that Ratzinger and Zizioulas viewed the episcopate as a guarantee of the Spirit’s guidance, ARCIC explicitly states that there is *no guarantee* that the human occupants of episcopal office will fulfill their responsibilities, just as there is no guarantee concerning the faithfulness of other individual members of the church.²⁷ In this way it can be said that ARCIC’s communal understanding of episcopal authority protects against presumption as to the ways in which the Spirit will act. There is room for the Spirit to act through anyone, and although those with the gift of *episcopate* are charged with discerning the work of the Spirit amongst the people, the ordained person’s attention to the Spirit is not to be *presumed*, but rather assessed and tested by all the faithful in their responsiveness to the Spirit.

Secondly, ARCIC interprets episcopal authority in a *synodal* context. The fact the Spirit indwells all believers has important implications for issues of unity and authority between the churches. Whereas Volf views every congregation as only eschatologically related to the universal church, ARCIC views the authoritative action of the church in speaking to the world as the responsibility of all churches together.²⁸ This necessitates some form of relation and accountability between churches (not only within each local church), for each local church must be able to recognize its true identity with the other churches, and test its attentiveness to the Spirit against theirs.

The mutual interdependence of all the churches is integral to the reality of the Church as God wills it to be. No local church that participates in the living Tradition can regard itself as self-sufficient. Forms of synodality, then, are needed to manifest the communion of the local churches and to sustain each of them in fidelity to the Gospel.²⁹

continued on page 8


The Spirit is given not simply to each believer as an individual, but to the Church as a whole. Therefore the churches must find ways to foster communion with one another, and conciliar activity is one of those ways.³⁰ This is why episcopal authority as envisioned by ARCIC cannot be understood apart from conciliar and synodal structures.

Furthermore, the grounding of episcopal authority in synodality is based upon the assertion that the *whole church* is guided by the Spirit. The decisions of councils and synods, as with the decisions of individual bishops, are taken to be authoritative "when they express the common mind of the Church."³¹ The recognition that a conciliar decision expresses the common mind of the church cannot be demonstrated simply by virtue of the fact that the bishops of the Church have made a decision, as Volf's charge of presuming upon the Spirit's action would seem to imply. Rather, the decisions of synodal gatherings, whether they are made by bishops alone or by bishops and representative clergy and laity, must be *received* by the faithful for their authority to be truly confirmed.³² This "requires the participation, in their distinctive ways, of the whole body of believers,"³³ and it is precisely this required participation which "is the final indication that such a decision has fulfilled the necessary conditions for it to be a true expression of the faith."³⁴ By this process, over time, the Church "in all its members" is involved, for the Spirit, "who maintains the Church in the truth will bring its members to receive the definition as true and to assimilate it if what has been declared genuinely expounds the revelation."³⁵

Finally, accompanying the grounding of episcopacy in synodality is ARCIC's affirmation of the *collegial* nature of episcopal authority. No bishop is to interpret his task of *episcopus* independently of his relation to other bishops, but he should rather consult his fellow bishops in order to attempt to discover the mind of the Church. This is particularly emphasized in relation to all expressions of primacy, including the universal primacy which ARCIC discusses in relation to the bishop of Rome. "A primate exercises his ministry not in isolation but in collegial association with his brother bishops."³⁶ Far from implying that the bishop of Rome has a monopoly on the guidance of the Spirit, or that he is infallibly guided at all times, ARCIC rather describes primacy as an office of promoting the *koinonia* of all churches, while respecting the integrity and authority of other bishops in their own sees.³⁷ It is the collective responsibility of the bishops to interpret the apostolic faith, taking into account the way the Spirit is speaking to various members of the Church, and though at times a primate may be called upon to make a statement on behalf of the whole church, such statements "are only one way by which the Holy Spirit keeps the people of God faithful to the truth of the Gospel."³⁸ ARCIC notes also that there have clearly been times in the past when the primacy of the bishop of Rome has been exercised in an unworthy manner,³⁹ an admission which again demonstrates that episcopal structures, and even primatial structures, need not imply a presumption of the work of the Spirit.

The concerns that Volf has raised are not completely unfounded, nor should they be dismissed. There have been many examples of abuse in episcopally-ordered traditions, which may have, in practice if not in theory, been premised upon a presumption of the Spirit's

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guidance by those in authority. However, the consensus reached by ARCIC on authority shows that there are theological accounts of episcopal authority which avoid the pneumatological pitfalls that Volf has outlined in his objections to episcopal polity. Indeed, the ARCIC documents show great sensitivity to the way in which the Spirit can work through all believers. The Spirit is presented as free to lead any believer to a new insight concerning the gospel, and all believers are called to weigh carefully the teaching and decisions that they receive from those exercising *episcopus*. On this basis, I would argue that the perspective on authority found in the ARCIC documents ought to be re-visited by free church theologians. There are ways for their concerns to be addressed within an episcopal context, and thus there is, I believe, still hope for agreement on this difficult issue. 

Notes:

1. "I want to argue that the visible principle of ecclesial unity ought to correspond to the nature of unity; the principle of unity should be trinitarian as the nature of unity itself is trinitarian." Miroslav Volf, "Trinity, Unity, Primacy: On the Trinitarian Nature of Unity and its Implications for the Question of Primacy," in *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church: Toward a Patient and Fraternal Dialogue* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 177.
2. Miroslav Volf, *After our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 191-200.
3. "Because every local church is a concrete anticipation of this eschatological community, it is decisive that one understand and live the *relationships within* a given local church in correspondence to the Trinity. Whereas these relationships are eschatologically abiding, those between local churches as local churches are merely historically determined and accordingly transient." *Ibid.*, 203.
4. Volf doesn't make the case for the social model in *After our Likeness*, but simply states, "I will adopt the general features of the social model of trinitarian relations as proposed especially by Jürgen Moltmann." *Ibid.*, 198.
5. This theme runs throughout *After Our Likeness*, but for a representative passage, see pp. 214-215.
6. *Ibid.*, 217.
7. "The various gifts, services, and activities that all Christians have correspond to the divine multiplicity... That these gifts are distributed for the benefit of *all*, however (1 Cor. 12:7), corresponds to the divine unity; *the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God* (the Father) are active in all these different gifts." *Ibid.*, 218-219.
8. *Ibid.*, 219.

continued on page 9

9. "The New Testament ecclesiology suggests that *pneumatocracy* cannot be realized through the juridically structured *hierarchy*. Though it may seem paradoxical, if the Church is truly to be ruled *from above*, its structures must arise *from below*. The reason is simple: since all members have the Spirit no one of them can monopolize his leading. Since the Spirit's leading is a privilege of all members, the structures of charismatic fellowship have to arise through the interaction of all its members." Volf and Peter Kuzmic, unpublished paper, quoted in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Church as Charismatic Fellowship: Ecclesiological Reflections from the Pentecostal-Roman Catholic Dialogue," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, no. 18 (04 2001): 115-116.

10. Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, 239.

11. *Ibid.*, 240.

12. "The crucial question is whether this self-binding of the Spirit to institutions can be *formalized* in the form of church law. The answer must be: No!" *Ibid.*, 241.

13. *Ibid.*, 242.

14. *Ibid.*, 243.

15. "Cognitive anticipations of future experience with the sovereign Spirit of God are *per definitionem* provisional; we *do not know* whether a person will have a certain charisma in the future as well." *Ibid.*, 244.

16. *Ibid.*, 249.

17. "If the charismata of office...were to result from a sacramental act (either of the universal church or of the local church), the sovereignty of the Spirit would be endangered since one would have to know beforehand when, with regard to whom, and how the Spirit of God will act." *Ibid.*, 249.

18. "To the extent that primacy is located in the singleness of a person and exercised in virtue of formal power received, it will fail to correspond to the Trinity." Volf, *Trinity, Unity, Primacy: On the Trinitarian Nature of Unity and its Implications for the Question of Primacy*, 184.

19. Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, "Authority in the Church I," in *The Final Report* (London: SPCK, 1982), §2, p. 52.

20. "The common life in the body of Christ equips the community and each of its members with what they need to fulfill this responsibility: they are enabled to live so that the authority of Christ will be mediated through them. This is Christian authority: when Christians so act and speak, mean perceive the authoritative word of Christ." *Ibid.* §3, p.53.

21. *Ibid.* §5, p. 53.

22. *Ibid.* §6, p. 54.

23. *Ibid.* §6, p. 54.

24. "In its mission to proclaim and safeguard the Gospel the Church has the obligation and the competence to make declarations in matters of faith. This mission involves the whole people of God, among whom some may rediscover or perceive more clearly than others certain aspects of the saving truth. At times there result conflict and debate... When conflict endangers unity or threatens to distort the Gospel the Church must have effective means for resolving it... the bishops have a special responsibility for promoting truth and discerning error, and the interaction of bishop and people in its exercise is a safeguard of Christian life and fidelity." *Ibid.* §18, p. 61-62.

25. "Through this continuing process of discernment and response, in which the faith is expressed and the Gospel is pastorally applied, the Holy Spirit declares the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the faithful may live freely under the discipline of the Gospel." *Ibid.* §6, pp. 54-55.

26. *Ibid.* §7, p. 55.

27. "The teaching of the faith and the ordering of life in the Christian community require a daily exercise of this responsibility; but there is no guarantee that those who have an everyday responsibility will – any more than other members – invariably be free from errors of judg-

ment, will never tolerate abuses, and will never distort the truth." *Ibid.*, §18, p. 62.

28. "The authoritative action and proclamation of the people of God to the world therefore are not simply the responsibilities of each church acting separately, but of all the local churches together." *Ibid.*, §8, p. 55.

29. Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1999), §37, pp. 27-28.

30. "A local church cannot be truly faithful to Christ if it does not desire to foster universal communion...This communion is founded on faith in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, crucified, risen, ascended, and now living through his Spirit in the Church. Every local church must therefore ever seek a deeper understanding and clearer expression of this common faith, both of which are threatened when churches are isolated by division." Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *Authority in the Church I*, §13, p. 58.

31. *Ibid.* §9, p. 56.

32. "When decisions (as at Nicaea in 325) affect the entire Church and deal with controverted matters which have been widely and seriously debated, it is important to establish criteria for the recognition and reception of conciliar definitions and disciplinary decisions. A substantial part in the process of reception is played by the subject matter of the definitions and by the response of the faithful. This process is often gradual, the decisions come to be seen in perspective through the Spirit's continuing guidance of the whole Church." *Ibid.* §16, p. 60.

33. Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III*, §43, p. 31.

34. Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, "Elucidation (1981)," in *The Final Report* (London: SPCK, 1982), §3, p. 72.

35. Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, "Authority in the Church II," in *The Final Report* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1982), §25, p. 92.

36. Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *Authority in the Church I*, §21, p. 63.

37. "Far from overriding the authority of the bishops in their own dioceses, this service was explicitly intended to support them in their ministry of oversight...The teaching of these councils shows that communion with the bishop of Rome does not imply submission to an authority which would stifle the distinctive features of the local churches." *Ibid.* §12, p. 57. Also, §20, "If primacy is to be a genuine expression of *episcopate* it will foster the *koinonia* by helping the bishops in their task of apostolic leadership both in their local church and in the Church universal." *Ibid.*, 63.

38. *Ibid.* §20, p. 63. Also, the third agreed statement, it is stated that any definition offered by the Pope "is pronounced *within* the college of those who exercise *episcopate* and not outside that college." Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III*, §47, p. 34.

39. "Sometimes functions assumed by the see of Rome were not necessarily linked to the primacy: sometimes the conduct of the occupant of this see has been unworthy of his office: sometimes the image of this office has been obscured by interpretations placed upon it: and sometimes external pressures have made its proper exercise almost impossible." Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *Authority in the Church I*, §12, p. 58. See also §48 of *The Gift of Authority*.