

AUTHORITY AND INFALLIBILITY IN ANGLICAN POLITY IN THE LIGHT OF THE TWENTY-FIRST ARTICLE OF RELIGION: A HISTORICO-THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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Abstract

Every religion derives its authority of influence on its adherents from its core beliefs, doctrines and practices that originate from the deity or deities which constitute the main object of its veneration and worship. In some cases, this is achieved through the agency of selected human devotees who being the prime contacts in the divine-human relationship, and first receivers of divine inspiration subsequently serve as founders of such religions. Authority in the Christian religion stems from its role as a framework for belief and practice within the faith. The Scripture from where authority is mainly derived provides a system of beliefs, values and rules that guide the faithful in spiritual lives. Generally, all Christian denominations agree that the Scripture, being the inspired word of God is infallible. Attitude to authority varies across Christian denominations, with some emphasizing scripture, tradition, or the pronouncement of religious leaders and the decisions of councils as their primary sources of authority. In others, religious groups or movements, leaders derive authority from their perceived charisma, spiritual gifts or their cult of personality. The doctrine of the infallibility of the pope which a significant pillar of Roman Catholic Theology, and which is part of the major focus of this paper marks a major point of disagreement among different Christian denominations in the multi-faceted presentation of Christian beliefs and persuasions across Christendom. Using the secondary sources of data collection through written works and the analytical approach, this paper sets out to outline the historical origins and the stand of the Anglican Communion to the contentious issue of papal infallibility in relation to the Anglican understanding of authority, as stipulated in her Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, especially Article XXI. While appreciating the high utility value of the doctrine of papal infallibility as a source of deep confidence, stability, rallying point and guidance in Roman Catholicism, this work surmises in alignment with the Anglican and reformed church traditions, that the achievement of infallibility in any facet of Christian theology and practice among both the human leaders and the lay faithful remains a tall order, because infallibility belongs only to God and his word, one of whose major divine characteristics is perfection. This is more so because members of the so-called “Church militant” (Christians still fighting against sin, the flesh, and the devil in their state of physical existence) are still susceptible to error, whether as individuals or as a group, obviously due to their inherent propensity to sin and human imperfection.

Key words: Authority, Infallibility, Anglican polity, Articles of Religion, Historico-Theological Reflection

Introduction

In religion, what adherents believe provide a necessary framework for their understanding and attitude to their religious orientation and behaviour, as well as gives credibility and authority to the understanding of their responsibility and roles in the human-divine interaction. Religious belief systems have both a theological framework to guide and enforce belief, as well as an administrative

setup in terms of human leaders that constitute its cult personnel, and they derived their authority and utilize such to regulate the spiritual lives of the faithful and shape the religious identity of the worshipping community. In most religions, especially in Christianity, the ultimate source of authority is considered to be God, and this authority is expressed through various channels such as sacred texts, (the Bible), religious leaders, traditions and personal religious experiences. The Bible is considered to be divinely-inspired to give guidance in moral principles for which Christianity is known.

The diversity of Christian denominations that exist in universal Christianity makes it inevitable for differing opinions and approach to issues to thrive side by side according to the theological orientations and preferences of the various groups involved. This also includes the different denominations emphasizing varying aspects of the components of their doctrinal authority in the quest to strengthen their group identity. For instance, some may place more emphasis on the authority of scripture, while others may emphasize the role of religious leaders or traditions. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that there are three sources of authority which includes the scripture, the magisterium, and tradition, and these contrasts with the stand of the majority of other denominations that hold the scripture as the only basic source of authority. One of the related issues in the resulting disagreement is the Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility with which it further applied as a rallying point to bolster the teaching authority of the Church. This paper attempts to present the Anglican view and response to the issue of authority while equally presenting (in the form of a comparative analysis) the stance of other non-Roman Catholic denominations on the issue of authority and infallibility, both from theological and historical perspectives.

Anglican polity as used in this paper refers to the Anglican denomination as one of the leading branches of the Christian religion in the world, the foundations of her history, constitution, doctrines, traditions, and church government by which her world-wide provinces are combined into an organic ecclesiastical entity known as the Anglican Communion. The Church's name, primarily structured from its English origin and history evolved from the influence of English Christian missionaries that spread it across the world, working under the opportunities and tutelage provided by the expansive colonial British Empire.

Biblical Infallibility

The doctrine of biblical infallibility which is generally upheld in all Christian groups is the belief that what the Bible says regarding matters of faith and Christian practice is wholly useful and true. According to McKim (1966) it is the belief that the Bible is completely trustworthy as a guide to salvation and the life of faith, and will not fail to accomplish its purposes. For McGrath (2011) this doctrine is a shared concept in Judeo-Christianity, as Jewish and Christian interpreters of the Bible see it as reliable and trustworthy, even where its veracity seem not to fully tally with its historical accuracy in some isolated cases. McGrath (2011) surmises that the idea of biblical infallibility gained ground in Protestant Churches as a fundamentalist reaction against a general movement towards modernism within mainstream Christian denominations in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Ruthven (2007) avers that in the Roman Catholic Church, this reaction to the influence of modernism and secularism in Christendom developed further to produce the concept of papal infallibility, whereas in the evangelical (reformed) churches, only the infallibility of the Bible was asserted. However, both concepts essentially represent a synthesis of a theological positioning as well as an ideological cum theological stance against the erosion of traditional Christian beliefs and church authority precipitated by the onslaught of liberalism and biblical criticism. In the light of the foregoing, Warner (2010) in his own take on the parallels of biblical and papal infallibility in the

Christendom asserts inter alia:

No matter how little common ground was apparent at the time between Roman Catholicism and the Evangelical Right, these two reformulations of scriptural and papal supremacy represented a defiant assertiveness in reaction against the crisis of religious authority that was engulfing Western religion (p. 19).

However, as infallibility means that errors are not possible for an idea or an entity in question, implying that there is no possibility of inaccuracy of any kind, the idea of papal infallibility readily begs the question even at the mere superficial meaning of the word “infallibility”. The generally accepted doctrine of infallibility of the Scripture among various Christian groups highlights the impossibility of error in the Bible. Another related word is the “inerrancy of Scripture” which reinforces the fact that the word of God is without error, while the usage of the term “infallibility” connotes the finality of the authority of Scripture that naturally derives from its inerrancy. It is noteworthy that the Anglican Church and other churches of the Reformation tradition from this common ground of accepting only the concept of biblical infallibility while rejecting that of papal infallibility have a more liberal and open approach to authority in their own spheres of Christian theology and world-view that are strictly based on adherence to scriptural stipulations.

Authority and the Doctrine of Papal Infallibility in Christianity

The doctrine of infallibility primarily held in Roman Catholicism asserts that the Pope, under specific conditions cannot err when teaching on matters of faith and morals. The dogma is not about the Pope's personal sinlessness or infallibility in all aspects of his personal life as some people widely misconstrue, but rather his ability to speak without error when formally defining doctrines for the Roman Catholic Church. However, the doctrine also alludes in a basically intrinsic manner, to a broader belief in cum underlying assumption of the infallibility of the Church, which is understood to be preserved from error by the Holy Spirit in its essential teachings in giving guidance to the faithful on matters of faith and doctrine. Gogan (1982) states that the doctrine of papal infallibility was first defined dogmatically at the First Vatican Council of 1869-1870 under Pope Pius IX, in the document *Pastor aeternus*. Papal infallibility is claimed to have existed in principle in medieval attitude and theology, obviously because of the extensive and unquestionable authority the pope exerted on the Church in those periods of the inter-marriage of secular and church history. This attitude to authority is also believed to have been the majority opinion at the time of the Reformation. The doctrine of papal infallibility which is closely tied with the Church's teaching authority relies on one of the pillars of Roman Catholic dogma - that of papal supremacy, whereby the authority of the Pope as the apostolic successor of St. Peter is the determining factor to what are accepted as formal beliefs in the Roman Catholic Church, in which the usage of this authority is referred to as the pope speaking *ex cathedra*. Along this premise, Wilhelm and Scannell (1906) state that Roman Catholicism believes that any doctrine of faith or morals issued by the pope in his capacity as the “successor to St. Peter” speaking as “Pastor and teacher of the Church universal” from the seat of Episcopal authority in Rome, and meant to be believed by the universal church has the special status of an *ex cathedra* statement. They further intimate that the Roman Catholic Church teaches that infallibility is a *charism* entrusted by Christ to the whole Church, whereby the Pope as the head of the college of bishops enjoys papal infallibility, which he uses to safeguard the faithful from defection, and to guarantee the continued profession of faith. The core of the doctrine of papal infallibility which is the belief that the pope is preserved from error when speaking definitely on matters of faith and morals provides a huge source of stability and guidance for Roman Catholics, particularly in times of doubt and uncertainty. In its essence, papal infallibility reinforces the understanding that Christ continues to provide guidance through the pope, who Roman Catholics

believe to be “Christ's Vicar on Earth”.

However, on the contrasting side, all other non-Roman Catholic Christian denominations reject the dogma of infallibility for obvious theological reasons. For instance, in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Patriarchs* of 1948, the Eastern Orthodox Church rejects papal infallibility on the premise that the Holy Spirit does not also allow the whole body of Orthodox Christians to fall into error, though in rejecting papal infallibility, it did not practically specify how the Orthodox Church will achieve this goal unlike Roman Catholicism's goal in the usage of papal infallibility. Melton (2005) asserts that the Methodist Church in rejecting the main thrust of the doctrine of papal infallibility however concedes in Article V of its Twenty-Five Articles that papal authority is capable of and could be useful in defining articles of faith and giving direction on other matters not clearly derived from Scripture. The Presbyterian and Reformed Churches in general reject papal infallibility in its entirety. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* which is the doctrinal statement of the Presbyterian Church published in 1646, in Chapter One X affirms that the Supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are determined, and all decrees of Councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence Christians are to rest can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture. In a similar vein, Larsen and Trier (2007) intimate that Evangelical cum Pentecostal Churches worldwide do not believe in the doctrine of papal infallibility for reasons similar to those of other churches of the Reformation tradition, holding that the Bible alone is the only reservoir of infallibility and inerrancy. However, this research notes that there seems to be a contradiction and a snag in the general attitude and approach of most Pentecostal Christians who reject the doctrine of infallibility in principle and yet in practice, somehow tend to assign a large measure of infallibility and inerrancy to the biblical interpretations, teachings, and lifestyles of some of their so-called charismatic leaders and 'famous' preachers. This attitude seems to be premised on the mere shallow but flamboyant claims of such influential leaders to a much closer relationship with the Holy Spirit than the leaders of other Christian denominations. This is also obviously heightened by the need to assert the identity and showcase the relevance of Pentecostalism in modern Christendom, along with the over-riding imperatives for Pentecostals to defend their theological interests within a wider Christendom, and for the projection of their inherent denominational chauvinism.

The Origins of the Anglican Church

The word “Anglican” originated from ancient Latin words *ecclesia anglicana* which means the English Church or Church of England. According to Neil (1977), no one can actually tell exactly when Christianity came to the British Isle. Obviously, Christianity in England can be traced back to earlier than AD 597 because when St Augustine and some monks came from Rome for missionary work in AD 597, Christianity already existed in England. According to Ibeto (2012) the history of Christianity has produced numerous notable separations. In 1054 came the first major schism which brought the Eastern Orthodox Church into existence, apart from the Roman Catholic Church.

The 15th and 16th centuries in Europe were times of change and upheavals in church and society. The beginning of the 16th century marked a significant dissent to the Church authority in Rome when Martin Luther challenged the status quo with his famous 95 theses in 1517. The influence of Luther's Reformation obviously reached England and seventeen years later in 1534, the English branch of the Church formally challenged the authority of the pope under the leadership of King Henry VIII. Bays (2001) asserts that it was the political difficulties around the succession to the English throne, and the wish for a stronger monarchy to preserve England's sovereignty from domination by foreign powers that led Henry to remove the Church in England from the control of the pope. According to Culling (1996) most accounts of the Anglican Church begin with the divorce

story of Henry VIII and the separation of the English Church from Rome. But the roots of the Anglican Church go back far deeper in time, and are tied to the beginnings of Christianity in the British Isle. Christianity was probably first brought to Britain by the Roman army. Culling (1996) states that much of the early history of the Church in Britain was written by St. Bede who gives the name of the first known Christian, St. Alban, who was martyred for protecting a Christian priest early in the 4th century. Summing up the early origins of the Anglican Church, she states:

The Anglican Church was not created out of nothing in the sixteenth century. The slate could not be wiped clean in order to start again, even if the Reformers had wished to do so. It is equally important to avoid seeing everything as leading up to the Reformation, however important the period was for the formation of the Anglican way. The word 'Anglican' as a term emerged only in the nineteenth century, but its distinctive forms and practices had been in the making for much longer. (p. 71).

However, the role of King Henry VIII in the formation of the Anglican Church can hardly be overemphasized. Ezeakunne (2016) states that Henry's face-off with the pope started with his (Henry's) desire to annul his dynastic marriage with Catherine of Aragon, widow of his brother Arthur. The King claimed that his lack of a male child by Catherine was because the marriage was blighted in the sight of God. Another reason for his desire to annul the marriage was to make a way for him to marry Anne Boleyn, Catherine's *Maid of Honour*. When Henry petitioned Pope Clement VII to annul the marriage and he refused, this precipitated the King's separation of the Church in England from papal authority. He consequently dissolved the monasteries in his domain and established himself as the "Supreme Head of the Church of England". Theologically, Henry and his government did not intentionally set out to establish a new Church when they broke politically from Rome. Rather, they were only taking full control of the Church in their realm of administrative influence, but the Anglican Communion subsequently and providentially evolved and blossomed from the confrontation between the king and the Pope.

Teaching Authority in the Anglican Communion

While it would seem that Anglicans have no enforceable Communion-wide *Magisterium* since the powers of the Anglican instruments of unity are largely recommendary, there is, however, a basic requirement for which a province or a diocese should assent to, to be recognized and operate as part of the Anglican Communion. Neil (1977) states the basic sources of the Anglican doctrine as follows:

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as containing all things necessary to salvation; the three ecumenical Creeds (Apostles, Nicene, Athanasian); the dogmatic decisions of the first four general Councils of the Church; the Book of Common Prayer together with the ordinal, as setting forth not only the Anglican order of worship, but also the theology of which that worship is the expression; the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion as the official summary of the Church's stand-point in relation to central issues of theology and to a number of controversial points of doctrine and practice. (p. 399).

Anglican tradition towards authority has leaned more towards the direction of mutuality expressed in the synodical government of the Church. Bays (2001) observes that for Anglicans, primacy must be exercised both collegially and synodically in consultation with the clergy and laity of the Church. The primate of a national Church exercises leadership in preaching and teaching, yet this teaching needs always to be open to the judgment of the Scripture, Tradition and Reason, and exercised in dialogue with the whole Church. Basically, the concept of "infallible authority" has no place in the Anglican Church, and in fact, Article XXI of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion unapologetically affirms that Church Councils and the people that constitute them, by the obvious natural inclination

of their humanity, can err in both spiritual and worldly matters. Being a loose federation of national Churches, the Anglican Communion naturally cannot forge a formidable central authority with legislative powers. As Bays (2001) puts it, "The Anglican Communion is held together by bonds of affection, the goodwill of its members rather than by legislation" (p. 29). The report of the Lambeth Conference 1948 describes authority in Anglicanism as follows:

Authority as inherited by the Anglican Communion from the undivided Church of the early centuries of the Christian era, is single in that it is derived from a single Divine source, and reflects within itself the richness and historicity of the divine Revelation, the authority of the eternal Father, the incarnate Son, and the Life-giving Spirit. (p. 85).

The report goes on to say that authority is found mainly through Six Sources: Scripture, Tradition, the Creeds, the Ministry, the Word and Sacraments, and through the witness of the saints, and the *consensus fidelium* recognition of truth by the body of the faithful people in the Church). Holy Scripture is the basic authority for Christians because it is the record of God's revelation to human beings. The Tradition of the Church and the historic creeds also have authority because they represent the Church's faithful working out of the meaning of God's word and salvation down through the centuries. Authority is exercised through leaders called by God through Church ministry for the proclamation and teaching of the word, administration of the sacraments and other pastoral services to the people.

In the Anglican Church, teaching and administrative authority is exercised through the three-fold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons, formally chosen, trained and lawfully ordained, and through synodical government in which lay people share with the clergy in the decision-making process of the Church. Commenting on the sharing of authority in the Anglican Communion, Sykes (1978) notes that the distribution of God's gift to the whole Church means that there are voices of authority, not one unequivocal voice of authority. He further posits:

Authority comes as a call of God and a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Church as a community participates in the power of Christ and of the Holy Spirit. This power is shared in the Church by clergy and laity.... All authority stems from the Spirit of Christ who fills the Church and leads it into truth. And Christian authority is found in individuals and institutions when the Spirit of Christ is discerned in them. (p. 169).

Liturgy and Authority in the Anglican Church

Anglican belief is drawn from the Holy Bible and encapsulated in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. Anglican liturgical tradition is embodied in the *Book of Common Prayer* the first of which was produced by Thomas Cranmer in 1549, and the most significant revision being the 1552 edition. Ibeto (2012) affirms that the 1662 *English Book of Common Prayer* forms the historical basis for most Anglican liturgy around the world. *The Book of Common Prayer* also contains the catechisms of the Anglican Church through which the systematic teaching of the Church's doctrines are effected down to the grass-root level. According to Ezeakunne (2016) Anglicans take the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of prayer is the law of belief) seriously, regarding the content, form and rubrics of liturgy as an important element of doctrinal understanding, development and scriptural interpretation. Also, Anglicans regard the work of foundational theologians of Anglicanism as both authoritative and instructive. Such include Cranmer, Richard Hooker, Lancelot Andrews and John Jewel. However, due to the decentralized authority structure of Anglicanism, Evans and Wright (1991) refer to Resolution 8 of Lambeth Conference 1867. This resolution is in the spirit of Article 34 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion which grants Churches the freedom to make appropriate provision for local needs in decreeing rites and ceremonies. The resolution reads in part:

That, in order to the binding of the Churches of our colonial Empire and her Missionary Churches beyond them in the closest union with the Mother Church, it is necessary that they receive and maintain without alteration the standards of Faith and Doctrine as now in use in

that Church. That nevertheless, each Province should have the right to make such adaptations to the services of the church as its peculiar circumstances may require. Provided, that no change or addition be made inconsistent with the spirit and principles of the Book of Common Prayer and by any Synod of the Anglican Communion in which the said Province shall be represented. (pp. 334-335).

Nazir-Ali (2013) states that Anglicanism inherited both the Sacred Deposit of Faith (of which the scripture is the norm) and a Sacred Ministry which is tasked with preaching the 'pure Word of God', and duly celebrating the Sacraments of the Church. These two form the basis of authority in the Anglican Communion. Although ministers are called of God and minister in his name, they are, nevertheless, always servants of the Word of God and never its masters, in the case of where it is allowed to happen, human imperfection and fallibility are bound to distort the true interpretation and presentation of the Scripture and the nature and intent of the Church's ministry.

The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion

The *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* was established in 1536 and the articles constitute the historic statements of Anglican doctrine in relation to the controversies of the English Reformation. The Articles also evolved as a reaction to the theological challenges posed by both the Roman Catholic Church and the excesses of Calvinist doctrines to the nascent doctrines of the evolving English Church. Chapman (in Ezeakunne, 2016) states that as the Church of England was charting out its doctrinal identity, a series of defining documents were written and replaced over a period of thirty years. The very first attempt was the Ten Articles in 1536, the next revision was the Six Articles in 1539 and then followed by the Forty Two Articles in 1552. Finally, upon the coronation of Queen Elizabeth I, the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion were established by a convocation of the Church in 1563, under the direction of Matthew Parker, the then Archbishop of Canterbury. The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion which were finalized to their present form in 1571 were to have a lasting effect in England and elsewhere in the Anglican Communion as a major source of theological authority and guidance. The Thirty-Nine Articles can be broadly divided into four sections - the fundamentals of the Anglican faith; the Anglican interpretation of the Scripture; the Scripture and the authority of the Church; and the relationship between the Church and society.

The Books of Homilies

Another major source of Anglican teaching authority is *The Books of Homilies*. These are two books containing thirty-three sermons developing the reformed doctrines of the Church of England in greater depth and details than the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. Many of the sermons are straightforward exhortations to read the Scripture daily. The other works are lengthy scholarly treatises intended to inform Church leaders in theology, Church history and against heresies. Each homily is heavily annotated with references to the Holy Scriptures, the Church Fathers and other primary sources. The first *Book of Homilies* published in 1547 was written mainly by Thomas Cranmer with twelve sermons, while the Second *Book of Homilies* with twenty-one sermons was written by John Jewel and published in 1571.

The Lambeth Quadrilateral

The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral frequently referred to as the *Lambeth Quadrilateral* is a four-point articulation of Anglican identity often cited as encapsulating the fundamentals of modern Anglicanism. According to Wolf (1982) the Lambeth Conference of 1888 produced an important document for the future of Anglicanism, especially in its relation with other Churches. The four points of the conference which are strongly connected to biblical roots and tradition include:

1. The Holy Scriptures as containing all things necessary to salvation.
2. The Creeds (specifically the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds) as sufficient statement of Christian

faith.

3. The Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion as ordained by Christ himself.
4. The historic episcopate locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the people of God.

The Lambeth Quadrilateral as a source of Anglican authority has had a significant impact on the Anglican Communion since its passing. It provided a basis for shared character as the then colonial Churches heavily influenced by British culture and values evolved into post-independence national ones, influenced by their local customs and driven by nascent needs for adjustments in church life and liturgy. The Anglican Communion does not possess a one-volume confession of faith like the Westminster Confession of the Presbyterians, nor does it claim a single founding theologian like a John Calvin or a Martin Luther. In the same vein, it has no central authority such as the Roman Catholic *Magisterium* to set generally accepted parameters of belief and practice. The universally accepted foundations of Anglican doctrine and source of authority that guide and regulate its faith and order are the Holy Scriptures, the great Creeds of the early ecumenical councils, the *Book of Common Prayer*, the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, and the four principles enshrined in the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral. A wide range of customs and practices and its historic tolerance for diversity and ambiguity are among the most notable characteristics of Anglicanism. However, in the modern day Anglican Communion as it relates to authority and infallibility, there is a notable breakdown in mutual agreement and tolerance which is occasioned by the widening polarization of opinions and interpretations between the theologically-conservative and the liberal sections of the Church.

The Prelude of Article Twenty

In preparing the ground for the twenty-first article, Article Twenty reads:

The Church hath powers to decree Rites or Ceremonies and authority in controversies of Faith: And yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church is a witness and a keeper of holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree anything against the same, besides the same ought it not to enforce anything to be believed for necessity of salvation (p. 379).

After deciding who the Church is in Article 19 and the other preceding articles, Anglicanism defines what the Church has authority over in Article XX. Kinrade (2018) notes that the first area the Church confirmed its power are over Rites and Ceremonies. Till date, every priest at their ordination and collation to a new rank or position must promise in the 'Declaration of Assent' in the ordinal to use only the forms of service authorized or allowed in the canon in public prayer and the administration of the sacraments. Kinrade (2028) also notes how Church does not claim authority over what priests pray in the privacy of their own homes and hearts, apart from what the Church has authorized for corporate worship. In its essence, this reflects the long established premise that worship expresses belief, in the principle of *lex orandi, lex credenda* (the law of prayer guides the law of belief).

The Article establishes the Church's authority over 'Controversies of Faith', provided that decisions do not contradict scripture. Browne (2022) intimates that Christ had given a promise of guidance and indefectibility to his Church, by which we may conclude that the whole Church should never be absorbed in one gulf of error. This elevates her to the ability to judge in controversies and root out heresies, with the subsequent disciplinary measures on heretics. This implies that the voice of judgment of the Church is of great value and importance, but neither as superseding nor adding to, but as correctly interpreting the divinely-inspired Scripture already made available to the Church.

The Crux of Article Twenty-One

For the Anglican Communion, the rejection of the doctrine of papal infallibility and other contentious matters of the Reformation is given ample expression in the contents of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, especially in Articles XX and XXI being discussed in this paper. Article 21 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion which dwells on the Authority of General Councils states:

General Councils may not be gathered without the commandment and will of Princes. And, when they be gathered together (forasmuch as they be an assembly of men, whereof all be not governed with the Spirit and Word of God), they may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining to God. Wherefore things ordained by them as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of Holy Scriptures (p. 379).

The fact remains that Article XXI recognizes General Councils as one of the major historical instruments of authority. Leorningnites (2017) asserts that during the Reformation, many Roman Catholics accused the Anglicans and other Protestant Churches of inventing a new religion under the guise of appealing to the authority of the ecumenical councils. The Anglican response was to affirm belief in the teaching of the first few Councils insofar as their teaching “be taken out of Holy Scripture”, without having to elevate them to an “infallible” status. Article 21 takes this answer a step further with a subtle pushback against the Roman Catholic position by asserting that the real ecumenical Councils are the ones called by Christian kings, or emperors, thus rejecting the many more so-called “ecumenical Councils” called by the Pope after the East and West parted ways in the Schism of 1054.

This research while appreciating the value of papal infallibility in Roman Catholicism, is more in alignment with the Anglican and reformed churches' stand that there is no promise of infallibility to church councils in the scripture apart from Christ's assurance of his presence and guidance, even though Christians are consequently required to obey and follow the faith of those who have the rule over them in the Church. Hence the judgment of spiritual leaders in the Church is much to be attended to. Yet infallibility is certainly not guaranteed nor promised to any one bishop or pastor no matter how highly placed. Individual bishops may err hence assemblies of individual bishops may also err, because though they have the grace of ordination according to the trajectory of Article XXI, all of them may definitely not be pious men governed by the Spirit and the Word of God. And scandals emanating from the lives and teachings of highly-placed leaders of the different Christian denominations have never been in short supply in any generation, right from the days of Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus to his killers, and Peter who denied his Master.

Browne (2022) states that the assertion of Article XXI that “General Councils have erred” refers to the later councils summoned by the pope and acknowledged only by the Western churches and those in obedience to Rome, commonly referred to as “General Councils” at the time of the Reformation, though never acknowledged by the Churches in the East. Of these, the fourth Lateran Council under Pope Innocent III in A.D. 1215 asserted the doctrine of Transubstantiation. The subsequent Councils of Constance in 1414 forbade the cup to the laity in the Eucharist; the Council of Florence in 1439 decreed the doctrine of Purgatory, while the Council of Trent (1545-1563) added to the Nicene Creed a confession of seven sacraments, Transubstantiation, Purgatory, Invocation of Saints, Image-worship, etc. This is at cross-roads with Anglican theology in the area of sacraments for example, where the only two ordained by Jesus Christ himself as sacramental imperatives necessary to man's salvation - baptism and the Eucharist are recognized. Anglicanism believes that the decrees of these Councils though called general councils, which never received the assent of the Eastern Churches, cannot therefore be of universal authority. These are the decrees which the reformed church traditions reject as being contrary to the scriptures, the proceedings and the final

decisions of which clearly contain the imprints of error, theological bias, and human fallibility in the subjective interpretation of the Bible that led to the decisions and decrees of the stated Church Councils.

In essence, Anglicans recognize mainly the decisions of the first four ecumenical councils of Nicaea in A.D. 325; Constantinople in 381; Ephesus in 431; Chalcedon in 451; and some decisions of the second Council of Constantinople in 553; and the third Council of Constantinople in A.D. 680. These are the only Councils whose decisions have been acknowledged by the universal Christendom. Earngey (2017) reiterates that Article XXI upholds the authority of the Scriptures over conciliar decisions by the mere fact that even the best of Christian Councils are still assemblies of men who are fallible people susceptible to sin and human error. And so, the decrees and canons of councils are subject to human error, whereas the sense and sentences of Scripture remain infallible and free from error. Earngey (2017) rightly surmises that this is the reason for the selective approach to early ecumenical councils among early Anglicans. It also explains why Anglicans have tended to choose liberally from canons of the later so-called ecumenical councils: the compulsory clerical celibacy of the first Lateran Council in 1123 was rejected, whereas the addition of the *Filioque* clause to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit (the Holy Spirit also proceeding from the Son) during the Council of Florence (1439) was retained in the Anglican presentation of the Nicene Creed. Browne (2022) cites Vicentius Lirinens' explanation of the Church's attitude to error which states that if a small part of the Church holds a private error, the Church should adhere to the view of the whole, and if the whole be infected by some novel opinion, then the Church should cleave to antiquity. Vicentius also posited the possibility of partial error being found in antiquity, in which case universal decisions should be prioritized over private judgments. Thus, provisions are made to acknowledge the recurrent possibility of error and fallibility in the Church in spite of the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, majorly due to the nagging possibility of even the body of believers not being able to fully discern the direction of the Holy Spirit when He provides such at any given occasion or gathering.

Conclusion

This work in reflecting on the perspectives of the Anglican and reformed church tradition, is of the opinion that the achievement of infallibility in any facet of Christian theology and practice among both the human leaders and the lay faithful remains a tall order, because infallibility as held in all religions belongs only to the divine, which in the Judeo-Christian context is God and his word, one of whose major incontestable divine characteristics is perfection. This is more so because members of the so-called “Church militant” the first tier of the people that constitute the church membership (Christians still fighting against sin, the flesh, and the devil in their state of physical existence) are still susceptible to sin and error, whether as individuals or as a group in council, obviously due to their inherent propensity to sin and human imperfection. While there is the assurance of the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide the Church in all facets of its life and ministry, there is still no gainsaying the possibility of human finitude constituting intervening and modifying variables against the full reception, interpretation and right application of such divine guidance.

Whereas Anglicanism and the other Churches of the Reformation tradition reject the doctrine of papal infallibility, the significance and high utility value of the doctrine in making for theological stability and discipline in the Roman Catholic Church is unarguable. Having a central figure in the person of the Pope, who is believed to be preserved from error when speaking on matters of faith and morals boosts the members' confidence in the Church's *Magisterium* – the teaching authority. This assures the faithful that the Church's doctrines are protected from error, and helps to promote confidence and trust in the organization and leadership of the Roman Catholic Church as an

ecclesiastical body. This also invariably helps the Church to project its ability to discern and protect the gospel truths in the Scripture against heresy. This contested approach to authority and papal infallibility between Roman Catholicism and the other major branches of the Christian faith is among one of the major fault-lines militating against doctrinal unity among Christians of different denominations and theological traditions in Christendom. Whereas the Roman Catholic faithful are under obligation to, and actually freely accept papal infallibility as defined in the Church's doctrine over the generations, Christians of other denominations while acknowledging and sharing the experience of Christ's promise of his eternal presence with, and guidance of the Church, only accept and profess as a doctrine, the infallibility of God himself and the sacred Scripture – which is his revealed word to the universal body of believers.

Since man, though created in the image and likeness of God has not yet attained the divine attribute of moral perfection; Reformed biblical theology is generally reluctant to assign inerrancy and infallibility to mortal man under any designation and title. This also extends to the institutions affiliated to and run by him because of man's finite nature that is always prone to sin and imperfection. This is more so because members of the so-called “Church militant” (Christians still fighting against sin, the flesh, and the devil in their state of physical existence) as the designated first tier of membership in the Church, are still always susceptible to error, whether as individuals or as a group, obviously due to their inherent fleshly limitations. The obvious corollary of this fact, coupled with the uncompromising theological stands of the various Christian denominations acquired and shaped over time guarantees that the doctrine of authority and papal infallibility though peculiar and useful to Roman Catholicism will continue to remain a bone of contention in universal Christianity.

Because of the prevalence of a sort of “theological relativism” in which every denomination insists on its own biblical interpretation and practices as being the ideal, the doctrine of papal infallibility will also remain one of the strongest counter-points in the advancement of ecumenical relations between Churches in modern times, and going forward. The negative connotation always attached to Protestantism and the so-called 'protestant' approach to issues of theology and church order mainly by Roman Catholic writers and commentators has a significantly inherent advantage of acting to provide the necessary checks and balances to theological and administrative extremities in their churches. This has obviously help to guard against the dangers of the over-concentration of ecclesiastical power and authority on one single person, group or Church Councils undoubtedly constituted by fallible human beings.

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