

Called to Witness and Fellowship

This paper has been commissioned by Archbishop Drexel Gomez as a submission from the Global South to the Lambeth Commission and was produced in Nassau Bahamas May 31-June 3.

Church as Communion

1. The content and central emphasis of the biblical and apostolic faith we hold as Anglicans is that God desires that all people be reconciled to Him and be his friends. God longs for our salvation and the renewal of his creation. God's Son and our Saviour Jesus Christ broke the barrier of sin and opened up the possibility of divine-human reconciliation and friendship. This central truth has the most profound implications for the nature of mission, which involves reconciling people to God, as well as for the nature of the church, which involves the uniting of people to each other in a loving fellowship that is in fact a family brought into being by the Holy Spirit. In other words, the fellowship or communion among Christians is grounded in the self-giving life of the Blessed Trinity.¹

Foundations

2. According to Scripture, true Christian fellowship grows out of a centring in the apostolic teaching and practice — from the sharing of the word, from corporate prayer and worship, from the breaking of bread, and in mutual service.² Our unity does not centre merely on liturgy or corporate worship but grows out of a common faith in the self-giving love of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is no foundation other than the foundation the apostles have already laid.

3. Far from being strange and new to Anglicanism, this biblical and apostolic emphasis is basic to it. For example, a primary canon of the Church of England places Scripture and obedience to it at the centre of the church's common life.³ The will of God and the history of salvation are definitively read from Scripture, not merely from nature or human experience. Scripture is the foundational and ultimate authority for God's church.

4. Scripture teaches that humanity's relationship with God began in innocence but soon suffered brokenness and alienation. Because of the love of God, this relationship is restored through Christ's loving and obedient willingness to pay the price for human sin and take upon himself sinful humanity's fundamental alienation from God. God's work of salvation must be understood in Trinitarian terms: the love of the one God for the world is extended and realized in the world through the mutually reinforcing work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The self-giving love of the Divine Persons is expressed in their relationship with each other. It is equally expressed in their sacrificial relationship

¹ 2 Corinthians 5: 19; Ephesians 2: 11-22; 1 John 1:3

² Acts 2:42

³ Canons of the Church of England

with the world.⁴

Order

5. The church not only teaches the mutual self-giving and relationality of the Trinitarian God as a matter of doctrine; the true church must reflect them in its practice and in the form of its common life. God by his nature is Three Persons in One God. The church by its nature is many members and one body. The Scriptures are replete with the theme and constant interplay of many local churches and members, on the one hand, and the universal church, on the other. Faithfulness to our biblical and apostolic inheritance and identity depends on the proper interrelationship of the local and the universal church.⁵

6. The universal church is from and of the local churches. The local church is the universal church in a particular place. However, this can be so only when any particular local church is in communion with other local churches that make up the universal church. In addition, this communion or mutual belonging depends on a shared commitment to right believing (biblical and apostolic doctrine), a shared commitment to right behavior (biblical and apostolic practice and church order), and a shared commitment to discipline when there are open and deliberate departures from right believing or right behavior.⁶

Development

7. This understanding of the nature of Anglican belief and communion is not merely traditionalist and antiquarian. Rather, it fully embraces the possibility and necessity of development in the church's life and teaching. From one generation to the next, and from one context to the next, the apostolic faith is constantly being shared, received, and shared again. New generations and contexts must not merely accept but inwardly receive, digest, and appropriate the apostolic faith, applying its transforming power to the totality of their situation. Some truths cannot be merely received. There has to be a fresh understanding and presentation of some truths, in part because of new knowledge and experience. The church is ancient but not a prisoner of antiquity. Impelled by God's love for humanity, and assisted by the Holy Spirit, we seek to present the Gospel in a way that communicates it in terms that are intelligible and compelling to our neighbors.

8. Yet such authentic and faithful development, grounded in Scripture as the chief touchstone, requires careful discernment, especially by those with particular responsibility for leadership in the church. John Henry Newman's tests of the authentic development of doctrine — such as vigor of the original idea, continuity of principles, and anticipation of the future — may be helpful. Less helpful is the frequently heard appeal to “Scripture, tradition, and reason” as the sum of Anglican method in this area. In fact, Article 20 of the Thirty-Nine Articles makes scripture central to discernment in the process of doctrinal development, not merely one of three co-equal criteria. In short, we

⁴ Romans 8 1-8

⁵ Ephesians 4: 4-16

⁶ 1 Corinthians 5: 9-13

must connect the Gospel to each new situation but also re-hear and reaffirm the basic and unchanging call of Christ and His Word in that situation.

Crisis

9. There is a new dynamism in the Anglican Communion that is part of the worldwide resurgence of Christianity. Consequently, Anglicanism has never been more worldwide, more diverse, more ecumenical, and more extensive in its impact — in spite of scarce resources and inadequate structures. This portends a future for the worldwide Anglican Communion that is set to exceed the bounds of even the present remarkable expansion. Such a future should give us hope and encouragement as well as confronting us with challenges.

10. Against the background of this resurgence, we have nevertheless been made mindful of new and provocative developments in the Anglican Communion in the West that compel us to raise fundamental questions about the continued unity of the church. In that connection, we view with acute dismay the unilateral and divisive actions by the Episcopal Church of the USA, the Anglican Church of Canada and certain developments in the Church of England to adopt policies that threaten the whole of the worldwide Anglican family. We believe it is urgent to ask whether these actions and policies are a result of authentic development or whether they are departures from the apostolic witness to revealed truth that require discipline.

Discipline

11. We believe that it is clear that those responsible for these actions and policies have made little or no effort to show how they could be authentic developments of doctrine grounded in Scripture. Any claim for an authentic insight, personal or communal, drawn from experience or culture must be consonant with the revealed teaching of Scripture and with the sense of faith down the ages and across the world. We believe that these claims and actions involve public departures from both our common apostolic faith and our common apostolic practice including the proper ordering of our apostolic and catholic church.

12. In particular, we believe that the recent actions by the Episcopal Church of the USA and the Anglican Church of Canada attack the church's witness to the Gospel and God's gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. They confuse and divide the church at its most essential points — namely, in its witness to apostolic and catholic teaching, practice and structure. These departures are deliberate, public, and sustained despite opportunities for correction and repentance. As such they are so serious that they necessarily damage communion and fellowship and imperil people's spiritual health.

13. We are saddened to observe that by their deliberate, persistent and unilateral actions they have torn the fabric of our communion “at its deepest level”. They have rejected appeals to adhere to the common faith and practice — including the mutual charity — that bind the members of God's family to each other and to God himself. In that sense,

the rupture or “realignment” of the Anglican Communion has occurred already. It is not an agenda or proposal to be implemented but a fait accompli that is now to be recognized. “The schismatic is the one who causes the separation, not the one who separates”.

Pledge

14. The challenge is how to respond to this reality in full accordance with our apostolic and biblical faith. How should Anglicans who affirm the apostolic and biblical faith respond if the central structures of the Anglican Communion fail to respond biblically and apostolically to these actions — that is, through the exercise of appropriate discipline. Above all, the many who remain in the Anglican family and continue to pass on the apostolic faith in different contexts and cultures require support and encouragement. Indeed, as we have noted above, we have witnessed an extraordinary expansion and reinvigoration of the Anglican Communion across the world, for which we rejoice and give hearty thanks to God. Adequate structures will need to be developed to support the many parts of the Anglican family — the vast majority — who have remained faithful to Anglicanism as a valid expression of the church of the Apostles.

15. We call on those responsible for the instruments of unity of the Anglican Communion, such as the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Primates Meeting to respond biblically and apostolically to these actions through the full exercise of appropriate discipline. Failure of these instruments to act will call into question both their viability and legitimacy as instruments of Communion. We commend those who remain in the Anglican family and continue to pass on the apostolic faith in different contexts and cultures. We are aware that they require support and encouragement. We pledge ourselves to provide adequate care and oversight for all those in north and south who find themselves alienated and abandoned.

We endorse and attach the enclosed paper on “The Current Crisis in the Anglican Communion - what are the Ecclesiological Issues involved?” prepared by a group of eminent theologians in the Communion.

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