

Mind the Gap: With reference to the recent inquiry commissioned by the Anglican Consultative Council - "The Bible in the Life of the Church" – are 'hermeneutical gaps' in the use of the Bible necessarily detrimental to Anglican 'communion'?

Background: Alexander Ross is an ordinand from the Anglican Church of Australia studying in Oxford. This paper is a critical analysis of the 'gaps' that the 'Bible in the Life of the Church' identified in November 2010. The paper was originally written as an academic paper.

Introduction

The recent and public image of worldwide Anglicanism, largely depicted by the international media and through the vanguard of online blogs and instant internet publications, has been characterised by debate, disagreement and conflict. Within the Communion, however, internal tensions have prompted Anglicans to re-evaluate how they engage with and use Scripture not as a tool for polemics but as a unifying discipline.¹ "The Bible in the Life of the Church" project is a recent initiative commissioned by the Anglican Consultative Council at their 2009 meeting in Jamaica (ACC14) which has sought to evaluate not simply how the Bible has been used in the Anglican tradition but explore how it currently is being used in prayer, study and worship across the Communion.

What has emerged from the project's enquiry is that there are a number of 'hermeneutical gaps', or disconnects, in the way the Bible is being used across the Communion. This paper intends to explore the nature of these gaps as well as their implications for the Anglican Communion as it struggles to reconcile difference and disagreement within itself.

The implications of these hermeneutical gaps for Anglicanism will be specifically analysed against Anglican self-identification as a 'communion', and particularly whether these gaps are necessarily detrimental to such a self conception. The concept of 'communion' within Anglicanism involves not simply an institutional and organisational reality but also certain theological and ecclesiological assertions concerning its relational existence as a community united in and as Christ's body. These dimensions of 'communion' within Anglicanism will be further unpacked in order to evaluate the impact of the 'hermeneutical gaps' against both of these aspects of Anglican 'communion'.

Background and Approach

The Bible in the Life of the Church project draws its mandate from the 2004 Windsor Report's observation that "the current crisis thus constitutes a call to the whole Anglican Communion to re-evaluate the ways in which we have read, heard, studied and digested scripture."² This mandate recognises that Scripture is never read in a vacuum, but that our patterns of reading are profoundly affected by how others in particular contexts and traditions, with which we might identify, have read and engaged with Scripture.

The project is structured into representative regional groups from Oceania, Southern Africa, East Africa, Britain, North America, South East Asia. Within these regional groups a common pattern of Biblical engagement was conducted

¹ The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *The Windsor Report* (London: The Anglican Communion Office, 2004), §§ 61-62.

² *Ibid.*, § 61.

which focused on the fourth and fifth Anglican Marks of Mission.³ Smaller 'User Groups' based in Cuba, other parts of Latin America and South Sudan have also been involved in providing input together with a Provincial wide project in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. Working over a period of three years, the project's Steering Group met finally in May 2012 in preparation to report back to ACC15 and the wider Communion at the end of the year. Each of the regional groups have undertaken a series of Bible studies to discern how Anglicans are engaging with Scripture and preliminary reports have been made by the regional representatives on how texts were handled, examples of methodologies and emerging hermeneutical principles and themes.⁴ Reflection is both objective (undertaken by an outsider) and self-reflective, and the project gives guidelines to aid this process.

Five 'hermeneutical gaps' were identified in the May 2011 report for the 'Principals' Conference' at the International Study Centre, Canterbury.⁵ These will be explored individually with particular attention to the extent to which they may reflect more systemic gaps within the life of the Communion. Tensions within the Anglican Communion are not simply the result of competing hermeneutical approaches. However explicit analysis of the way in which the Bible is used across the Communion offers an insight into key causes of stress and misunderstanding.

This paper is particularly informed by the reports produced by each of the project's regional representatives, offering immediate reflections on the outcomes of the experience in their own context. In May 2012 I was privileged to be invited to participate in the final Steering Group meeting held in Woking, England. At this meeting I was given the opportunity to present a draft of this paper to the regional representatives and the feedback, conversations and interactions from that fruitful dialogue have further informed my reflections.

Anglicanism as a 'communion'

This study is concerned not simply with the implications of the 'hermeneutical gaps' for the existing institutional structures of the Anglican Communion, but also for the quality of that communion as a relational and theological reality.

An international family of churches rooted in the tradition of the Church of England developed through mission (as in Angola), British colonial expansion (as in Mauritius) and a combination of other circumstances.⁶ Significantly, the ramifications of the American Revolution led to the formation of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America independent of the Church of England and drawing on the liturgical traditions of both England and the disestablished Episcopal Church in Scotland.⁷

³ "To seek to transform unjust structures of society" & "to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth". The 5 Marks of Mission were developed by the Anglican Consultative Council between 1984 and 1990.

⁴ Although the content of these Bible studies was common, their implementation differed according to context. The project allows for and encourages this flexibility.

⁵ The Principal's Conference at the International Study Centre, Canterbury, was an initiative of the Theological Education in the Anglican Communion Steering Group gathering together principals and deans of theological colleges from across the Communion

⁶ This is not intended to be a comprehensive account of the development of global Anglicanism. For further detail refer to, among others, B. Kaye, *An Introduction to World Anglicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); K. Ward, *A History of Global Anglicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); A. Wingate, K. Ward, C. Pemberton, and W. Sitshebo, eds., *Anglicanism: A Global Communion* (London: Mowbray, 1998).

⁷ K. Ward, "The development of Anglicanism as a global communion," in *Anglicanism: A Global Communion*, ed. A. Wingate, K. Ward, C. Pemberton, and W. Sitshebo (London: Mowbray, 1998), 15.

Throughout the 20th century this dynamic evolves as various Anglican provinces and national churches mature, asserting their own distinctiveness within their differing contexts and shifting the centre of gravity within Anglicanism away from the Church of England.⁸ Building on the foundations of the 19th century Lambeth Conferences, relations between the various Anglican Provinces came to be expressed after the Second World War in terms of “mutual responsibility and interdependence.”⁹

The development of worldwide Anglicanism illustrates a number of key elements concerning the nature of its communion against which each of the “hermeneutical gaps” may be tested. The spread of Anglicanism largely through colonial rule raises questions of appropriate power dynamics in a communion. Intrinsic to this dynamic is an awareness of how the ‘other’ is both respected and edified. Self-awareness and critical reflection encourage and facilitate the sharing and valuing of diverse experiences across diverse contexts. Related to this concern is the rightful place and proper practice of shared discernment within the Communion’s common life.

Similarly, the missionary spread of Anglicanism brings into focus the missional nature of communion itself. Social doctrines of the Trinity which are employed analogously to *koinonia* ecclesiology make much of the “dancing circle of self-giving and mutually indwelling divine persons”¹⁰ as a blueprint for ecclesial communion, but are impoverished if they fail to give equal attention to the *missio trinitatis* whereby the Son is sent by the Father, and the Spirit through the Son, into the world to effect the transformational incorporation of all people into relationship with God through the instrument of the Church.¹¹ Mission, therefore, is an essential element of communion.¹²

The nature of this communion is also corporate. Incorporation into the ‘Body of Christ’ means to be ‘grafted in’ to a sharing of the inheritance which is rooted in God’s promise to God’s people, calling them out of slavery and into freedom (Rom 11:17). It is through incorporation into and unity with Christ that this is effected (Rom 6). This participation in Christ “has its source in the Triune God himself” through whom we “are committed to full participation in his redeeming mission.”¹³ Communion, therefore, involves participation in a greater corporate narrative which has as its goal the transformation of estrangement into relationship which is the eschatological hope of redemption.

Communion, then, within the Anglican tradition is missional and corporate with an

⁸ M. Oxbrow, “Anglican and reconciling mission: an assessment of two Anglican international gatherings,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 33, no. 1 (2009): 10.

⁹ The origin of this important phrase comes from Bishop Stephen Bayne’s call to a renewal of missionary awareness across the Communion in the early 1960s, stemming from his role as the Executive Officer to both the Lambeth Consultative Body and the Advisory Council on Missionary Strategy which was an important forerunner to the establishment of the Anglican Consultative Council in 1968. See particularly his seminal report published as S. F. Bayne and Advisory Council on Missionary Strategy., *Mutual responsibility and interdependence in the body of Christ : with related background documents* (London: S.P.C.K., 1963).

¹⁰ M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness and reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 128.

¹¹ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Orbis, 1991), 390.

¹² Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, *The Virginia Report* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1999), 2.16-2.26. The Virginia Report draws particularly on the work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission in relating communion and mission, ie. the Commission’s insistence that “[Ecclesial Communion] necessarily finds expression in shared commitment to the mission entrusted by Christ to his Church.” See Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Church as Communion* (Dublin, Ireland: Anglican Communion Office, 1990), ¶ 45.

¹³ P. Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission* (London: T & T Clark International, 2005), 5.

emphasis on shared discernment, awareness and respect of the 'other' and with a sensitivity to implicit and explicit power dynamics. The gaps identified by the Bible in the Life of the Church project may be analysed according to these central elements of Anglicanism to determine whether they are necessarily detrimental to its communion.

Gap between 'Fruits of Study' and Hermeneutical Methods

The Bible in the Life of the Church project has revealed a key disconnect between the 'academy' and the 'pew' in how our understanding of biblical texts is related to the processes and methods of interpretation. This disconnect between the "fruits of study" and the hermeneutical tools employed in their discernment was also present, in some cases, within the academy where the pedagogical approach between professor and students was described by the Principal of a Sudanese training institute as to "pour out information like water into empty cups."¹⁴ If such a gap exists within the 'academy' it is hardly surprising that it might then be replicated in the context of mission and ministry where those who employ hermeneutical tools in preaching and teaching "forget or do not feel the need consciously to explain them to those in the pew."¹⁵ The project identifies the problematic potential of an Anglican hermeneutic which lacks critical self-awareness and reflection.¹⁶ Particularly important is awareness of those influences which shape hermeneutical methods and their outcomes, as these may have far-reaching implications in practice. Three broad sets of influences can be identified from the Bible in the Life of the Church project: the impact of accepted hermeneutical tools; the extant power dynamic between facilitators and participants in Scriptural encounter; and, often tacit and latent assumptions about authority which underlie global politics.

The first of these influences, the impact of hermeneutical tools, questions whether a disconnect between understandings of Scripture and the hermeneutical tools used to discern these understandings leaves Anglicans ill-equipped to evaluate the various factors influencing the fruits of interpretation. Such factors include church experience, interaction and engagement with other cultures, community life, and educational experience. The Anglican approach to Scripture certainly uses and values the tools of critical hermeneutics, such as commentaries, study bibles, concordances, lexica and other cultural and historical references.¹⁷ These are not in themselves in any way distinctively Anglican, allowing for a breadth in theological and ecumenical conversation.¹⁸ Nevertheless, these tools are not 'neutral' in the interpretive process and may project their own biases and theological perspectives and prejudices.

The impact of these perspectives and prejudices may be inferred from the report of the British Region:

... the way the groups read reflected their particular constituency. A group from one church known for its interest in social justice and political matters read together in that light ... [Another] group seemed to want to find

¹⁴ E. Davis, "The Bible and the Environment": A Leadership Seminar for Theological Educators in the Episcopal Church of Sudan (Juba, Sudan, 2010), 1.

¹⁵ S. Lyon, "Mind the Gap! Reflections on the "Bible in the Life of the Church" Project," *Anglican Theological Review* 93, no. 3 (2011): 459.

¹⁶ C. Rowland, "Reception History," in *Searching for Meaning: An Introduction to Interpreting the New Testament*, ed. P. Gooder (London: SPCK, 2009), 113.

¹⁷ The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *Windsor Report*, § 60.

¹⁸ C. M. Roark, "Hermeneutical Tools and Their Use," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 35, no. 3 (1993): 5.

answers from the text that would sit within their particular theological constituency, whilst a group with a particularly strong academic background consequently brought a more “academic” ... engagement to the text ...¹⁹

It is notable that even within this reflection from the project itself there is some evidence of the gap which understands academic engagement as distinct to engagement within either a social, political or theological paradigm. While one approach is clearly given no preference, the gap between the ‘academy’ and ‘pew’ is evident.

Alternatively, the Cuba User Group exhibited a hermeneutical approach which was inextricably linked to the worshipping life of the community and identified the Bible as part of a living witness, or ‘tapestry’, of experiences.²⁰ The hermeneutical focus of the Cuba User Group was not on the interpretation of the Bible, but rather how it interpreted the life of the community in the context of worship.²¹ This User Group was drawn from members of the community of *San Felipe Diacono* – a small and very poor Episcopal community consisting almost entirely of women, many of them from African origin, with deep roots in the Anglican tradition. In stark contrast a user group from the Evangelical Seminary of Matanzas, consisting of students and academics, demonstrated an “over-critical and demanding” hermeneutic which was suspicious of more popular readings.²²

An uncritical approach also exposes the “fruits of study” to a problematic and implicit power dynamic: a similar study of the use of Scripture within a South African context identified that the facilitator’s “whiteness and maleness” had an implicit power influence on the group.²³ This influence is evident where the facilitator is himself looked to as a hermeneutical tool and privileged over what else might otherwise have been a fruit of the hermeneutical method within that given context. An awareness of the influence of those with whom we read the Bible is critical not just for self-reflective practice but also for purposeful engagement with alternative perspectives and contexts.²⁴ The North American report reflected a diversity of perspectives, with a notable and significant contribution from the perspective of First Nation people who similarly showed a commitment to encountering Scripture predominantly through the medium of worship and “believed that God is present when you engage the text, God is actively involved and speaks when the community engages with the text.”²⁵ This distinctive contribution from an Indigenous perspective acknowledges and critically evaluates Western ‘Bible Study’ methods which may themselves be “a detriment to people’s capacity to see sacred truth and divine presence in Scripture, as we have been educated out of believing that God is present and speaks to God’s people. We need not a method but an attitude.”²⁶

The implications of this gap between hermeneutical methods and their fruits also reveals the concerning potential of the exploitation of unjust power dynamics in an international context. This may be conceptualised through the lens of “postcolonial theory” which offers a critical analysis of global systems in which “the voice of the ‘other’ is silenced” and extends liberation theology’s critique of

¹⁹ British Regional Group, *Report for Bible in the Life of the Church Meeting* (Durban, 2010), 2.

²⁰ Cuba User Group, *Report for Bible in the Life of the Church Meeting* (Durban, 2010).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Cuba User Group, *Report for Bible in the Life of the Church Meeting* (Woking, 2012), 4.

²³ G. O. West, *The Academy of the Poor* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 26.

²⁴ Ibid., 32.

²⁵ North America Regional Group, *Report for Bible in the Life of the Church Meeting* (Durban, 2010), 5.

²⁶ Ibid.

unjust and oppressive economic structures to the political sphere.²⁷ It provides a valuable critique of a triangular hermeneutical system in which the Bible provides the text, Western theology and tradition gives interpretation and the rest of the world receives or follows, at best finding application within their own contexts.²⁸ Such an explicitly deductive model of global hermeneutics identifies an oppressive and paternalistic methodology which is not simply problematic but dangerous.²⁹

This gap at best attempts to preserve the distinctiveness and integrity of various approaches to Scripture as well as the diversity of their interpretive fruits, but fails to relate them or to reflect self-awareness which enables dialogue across these same gaps. Communion cannot be realised where hermeneutical methods, influenced by a diversity of factors, are not related to outcomes. As they cannot be discerned together they can only be imposed, introducing a foreign and destructive power dynamic which obstructs the sharing and valuing of diversity and the edification of the other.

Gap between Scriptural engagement with some issues and not others

The reading of Scripture is bound up with the Church's approaches and responses to particular issues within certain contexts. The Bible in the Life of the Church project suggests that there is a gap between "those issues or topics where the Church gained understanding from Scripture and those where it relied more heavily (possibly exclusively) on other sources."³⁰ Not only is this gap apparent across various issues, but also seems to be reflected across different geographical, socio-economic, cultural and theological contexts.

This was observed particularly from the Australian reflection on Scriptural engagement with environmental and ecological issues identified in the first Case Study of the project which itself focused on environmental and ecological justice.³¹ Environmental issues have been prominent in the Australian context and this is reflected in a number of initiatives and responses of Australian Anglicans.

The Anglican Church of Australia's *Environmental Working Group* produced a comprehensive document, *Green by Grace*, establishing a theological basis for Christian environmental policy. The group's theological reflection centred on New Testament perspectives of graceful participation in God's purpose and response to God's call, founded on the premise that God's promise of redemption extends to the environment as well as humanity. The document, however, is not widely known and does not make extensive use of biblical texts beyond citations of support from Genesis 1 and Romans 8.³²

It is evident that the deliberate use of Scripture in theological reflection and

²⁷ L. S. Rukundwa, "Postcolonial theory as a hermeneutical tool for biblical teaching," *Hervormde teologiese studies* 64, no. 1 (2008): 343.

²⁸ *Ibid.*: 345.

²⁹ A. Thiselton, "Biblical studies and theoretical hermeneutics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. J. Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 108.

³⁰ Lyon, "Mind the Gap! Reflections on the "Bible in the Life of the Church" Project," 459.

³¹ For further research on how the Bible is used in relation to environmental and ecological concerns refer to the 'Uses of the Bible in Environmental Ethics' project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council at the University of Exeter. Publications include: D. G. Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical, Ecological Biblical Theology* (London: Equinox, 2010); D. G. Horrell, C. Hunt, C. Southgate, and F. Stavropoulou, eds., *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives* (London: T & T Clark, 2010).

³² The document is available at General Synod Environment Working Group of the Anglican Church of Australia, "Green by Grace (2004)" http://www.environment.perth.anglican.org/documents/WG-Environment_Greenby%20Grace_.pdf (accessed 19th February 2012).

engagement with ecological and environmental issues was limited in the Australian context. This can perhaps be traced to a sense of complacency that “the science is settled ... the theology is settled ... the morality is settled,” and that the “very success of awakening Anglican Christian awareness to ecological concerns has thus perhaps taken the edge off actual use of the scriptures in relation to this issue.”³³

In contrast to the Australian experience, the East African Reference Group described the Case Study 1 workshop as a “landmark event”, the “first of its kind to critically look at the ways in which the church had used the bible”, with regard to the Fifth Mark of Mission.³⁴ In this context environmental concerns had not previously been a motivating influence for theological enquiry and mission was understood primarily in terms of evangelisation.³⁵ Deliberate and explicit encounter with Scripture was able to relate ecological and environmental concerns with a primary emphasis on “saving souls”:

... The point which the majority of the texts brought home is that God’s creation, which includes human being, is mutually dependent on each other ... Indeed the redemption and survivor of human beings depends on the redemption of creation as Romans 8: 18-23 seems to imply. It would be erroneous to think that redemption only belongs to human beings since it is not just believers who will be delivered from corruption (1 Cor. 15: 42, 50) but also the non-human creation. Almost all texts that were discussed seemed to agree with the Pauline view in Romans 8: 18-23 that the creation must be redeemed so that humanity may have a fitting environment...³⁶

While the use of the Bible in this context seems primarily concerned with relating soteriology and eschatology with ecology, more general principles in support of environmental care and sustainability were grounded in inspiration drawn from East African “primal religion and worldview.”³⁷ Anglicans do not simply engage with Scripture selectively according to issues and topics, but also according to their differing contexts.

Inherent in this gap is a tension between what Brueggemann describes as the joint task of “discovering” and “assigning” a voice within the text, thereby “making” and “finding” meaning.³⁸ In the Australian context meaning was discovered in texts which dealt explicitly with the stewardship of creation and appropriately assigned a voice on these issues. In East Africa, however, meaning was found through the discovery of a voice within the text that could relate environmental and soteriological which, in their own context, could offer new a renewed insight into God’s purpose for creation and its missionary imperative. The interpretation of Scripture into diverse cultures is always necessary, but is never objective and is mediated by that context. The corporate reading of Scripture is essential to balancing the challenge and call of Scripture with the particular concerns and questions of any given context. The attempt to hold together these two hermeneutical perspectives ultimately renders all

³³ Australia Regional Group, *Report for Bible in the Life of the Church Meeting* (Durban, 2010), 4.

³⁴ East Africa Regional Group, *Report for Bible in the Life of the Church Meeting* (Durban, 2010), 2.

³⁵ This emphasis on evangelism was also identified within some parts of Australia as the dominant missionary mindset. See Australia Regional Group, *BiLC*, 4.

³⁶ East Africa Regional Group, *BiLC*, 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁸ W. Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality: What We Do When We Read the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 13.

interpretation as “provisional and penultimate.”³⁹ If this tension cannot be held, and the gap exacerbated, it may well prove detrimental to Anglican communion. If the purpose of communion, existing together in and as Christ’s body, is to await, anticipate and prepare for the transformation of resurrection into new creation then it is a state which is necessarily both penultimate and provisional.⁴⁰ In the process of both making and finding meaning, communion is compromised when we engage Scripture with some issues and not with others and when we cut Scripture off from dialogue with other sources of insight.

Gap between engagement with particular passages of Scripture and setting passages within larger Biblical context

The project has also identified a gap between Anglican engagement with particular passages of Scripture and the setting of those passages within their larger Biblical context. Within the regional reports there was a general willingness to put texts into conversation with personal events and experiences. This was noted explicitly in the UK context where “readers were reluctant to put the text with which they were working into conversation with other biblical texts.”⁴¹ The report from East Africa did show a more explicit attempt to relate different ‘key texts’, particularly Romans 8:18-23; 1 Corinthians 15:42, 50 and John 3:16-17, but even here the texts seemed to be employed in the report as evidence of ‘Biblical proofs’ rather than a dialogue.⁴²

The liturgical expression of the Cuba User Group demonstrated an awareness of the inter-connectedness of the Biblical narrative. Their practice was that each participant would bring a text which spoke meaningfully to their own experience and these texts were represented liturgically by small patches of material which were physically joined together, or quilted, and the analogy made concrete with the Bible as a grand narrative of “the faith of a people, their walking in dialogue and relation with God, their interpretation of the events of their lives and history to the light of faith and spirituality.”⁴³ However, even within this liturgical expression of Scriptural connectedness there is little suggestion that texts were actively put into conversation with each other.

The North American report made the observation that “It’s difficult to defend the 5th Mark of Mission from Scripture if you’re looking for a proof-text rather than the grand-narrative.”⁴⁴ It was noted that proof-texting was not confined to any particular theological or ecclesial group within the Church but that both liberals and conservatives display a tendency and preference to “reduce the text to a single univocal meaning.”⁴⁵ The report offers some insight as to why this might be the case, identifying a context of widespread Biblical illiteracy as the underlying cause of a loss of awareness of, and inability to appreciate, the Scriptural ‘grand narrative’.⁴⁶

There is some justification, however, in revising this widespread dismissal of the use of ‘proof-texts’. Scripture may indeed speak directly and definitively to certain issues in explicit texts and these texts might rightly be given preference in

³⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁰ World Council of Churches - Commission on Faith and Order, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1998), ¶ 30.

⁴¹ British Regional Group, *BiLC*, 2.

⁴² East Africa Regional Group, *BiLC*, 3.

⁴³ Cuba User Group, *BiLC*, 2.

⁴⁴ North America Regional Group, *BiLC*, 1.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

the Church's discernment of its teaching and practice.⁴⁷ Hermeneutical inquiry is impoverished without an acknowledgment of the particularity of certain texts within the wider Biblical narrative, and it is of course the task of every Christian to engage explicitly with the words of Scripture. This call for explicit engagement with texts carries with it, however, a responsibility to be attentive to the inherent danger of smoothing contextual differences and imposing anachronistic and uncritical interpretations onto texts.

The hermeneutical gap inherent in holding together both a desire to engage explicitly with particular texts, and putting those texts in conversation with the 'grand narrative' of Scripture, certainly poses a threat to the Anglican Communion's common life. This is not least because those issues which have proved most contentious in the contemporary context (homosexuality, and the ministry of women) lend themselves easily to proof-texting and polarisation.

Perhaps one factor, at least in the Western context, which threatens to hold apart this gap is the increasing "privatization" of the Bible as "a resource and guide for personal life" by which Christian faith and discipleship are conceived of predominantly as "me and Jesus."⁴⁸ This is a tendency seemingly more prevalent in the West. The British Reference Group observed that readers "did not want an academic approach or any theological answers to their questions" but "people did generally want to use the text to inform life and decisions."⁴⁹ Alternatively in the South Sudan, "despite the cultural disposition to orient toward the Bible, Sudanese students in formal educational settings are not always encouraged to see the connections between the Bible and their own lives."⁵⁰

Nevertheless, Scriptural engagement which preferences personal ethics and holiness of life might unhelpfully neglect those issues of "socioeconomic [and] political implications that concern our life in the world."⁵¹ This tendency in the West, within both the Academy and private devotion, to avoid political questions raised by biblical texts explains why 'liberationist hermeneutics' developing out of Latin America has felt so 'novel'.⁵² Brueggemann pointedly observes that:

... Many in the Church are scandalised when it is suggested that the Bible lives at the interface of the great issues of war and peace, health care delivery, economic justice, and management of the creaturely environment...⁵³

However there are signs also that this privatisation is being challenged.⁵⁴ The impact of social-scientific theories in hermeneutics "makes explicit, and therefore open to criticism and debate, the models and assumptions being used" in biblical studies.⁵⁵ Engagement with the Bible at this level is to participate in the 'Grand Narrative' of the biblical themes of justice, emancipation, stewardship, redemption and transformation. If communion is incorporation into this narrative, then our use of the Bible ought to facilitate this and not simply be treated as a quarry from which to mine proof-texts in support of one or other

⁴⁷ S. R. Murray, "Proof text or no text?," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (2002): 170.

⁴⁸ Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality*, 18-19.

⁴⁹ British Regional Group, *BiLC*, 2.

⁵⁰ E. Davis, "*The Bible in the Life of the Sudanese Church*": A report submitted to the Anglican Communion Office (Duke Divinity School, 2011), 5.

⁵¹ Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality*, 19.

⁵² T. Gorringer, "Political Readings of Scripture," in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. J. Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 74.

⁵³ Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality*, 19.

⁵⁴ Gorringer, "Political Readings of Scripture," 76.

⁵⁵ K. Whitlam, "The social world of the Bible," in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. J. Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 45.

presuppositions. This perhaps draws on a Patristic model of exegesis, where Scripture speaks with one complicated voice and different texts are creatively put in conversation with each other and where the theological underpinning of hermeneutics is that of dialogue rather than isolation.⁵⁶ Standing in this tradition, Anglican engagement with the Bible ought to draw us closer into communion both with God and each other:

... In our reading together of the Bible, in our making sense of it, we are called into a deeper sense of engagement with God, one that combines our relatively brief time on earth with God's eternal nature...⁵⁷

The hermeneutical gaps identified by the project at least identify the "hermeneutical space"⁵⁸ into which "conversations take place in search of meaning."⁵⁹

Gap between different hermeneutical and pedagogical methodologies

Although the selection of materials for the first Case Study of the project was common across all the Regional Groups, there was significant variation in both hermeneutical and pedagogical methodologies within and between regions.

The report from North America explicitly identified at least four different methodological approaches, including a critical-feminist approach, a hermeneutic from the perspective of First Nation people, canonical criticism as well as an experiential approach which linked texts to an external associated artefact having some personal connection with each participant.⁶⁰ The Regional Report from East Africa specifically commended to the East African Anglican community as well as the entire worldwide Communion a hermeneutic which drew on the wisdom of the "primal societies".⁶¹ Attentiveness to these alternative methodologies offers a challenge to hermeneutical complacency:

... Favouring the indigenous and the local ... encouraging self-affirmation and self-esteem [and] opposing centralizing systems and theories ... gives strength and visibility to those most in danger of being swept away by the controlling, but often subtle, effects of Western cultural imperialism...⁶²

These methodologies were most effective when well known to the participants and appropriate to their context, however a gap was observed where 'outsiders' facilitated the Scriptural engagement using hermeneutical methods which were unknown or did not translate easily across cultural, ethnic, theological and language boundaries.

Particularly effective in the experience of First Nation peoples in North America was an appreciation of the text as "a tool to enable a meeting with and

⁵⁶ B. Daley, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable? Some Reflections on Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. E. Davis and R. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 86.

⁵⁷ H.-A. Hartley, *Making Sense of the Bible* (London: SPCK, 2011), 73.

⁵⁸ B. Lundblad, *Marking Time: Preaching Biblical Stories in Present Tense* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 74.

⁵⁹ Hartley, *Making Sense of the Bible*, 64.

⁶⁰ North America Regional Group, *BiLC*, 3.

⁶¹ East Africa Regional Group, *BiLC*, 2.

⁶² D. Holgate and R. Starr, *SCM Studyguide to Biblical Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 131.

understanding of the divine will, guided by the fellowship of Christians under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit."⁶³ This is a hermeneutic which emphasises the inherent calling of the text speaking outwardly into the specific context of the community or individual, rather than a scrutiny or analysis from outside into the text:

... [Sacred truth] has a necessary complexity that implies an interpretive humility ... Hence, if and when First Nation people engage in these conversations, they are careful not to respond too quickly. When it comes to scripture, many communities practice this in the structure of their gatherings. They begin by reading the text three times and, with each reading a question is asked: (1) what stands out for you, (2) what do you hear God saying, (3) what is God calling us to do? It is believed that God is present when you engage the text, God is actively involved and speaks when the community engages with the text ...

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As a tool for "cultural formation" Scripture invites its hearers to be shaped by its narrative and to be incorporated into its promise.⁶⁵ In this way it may rightly be understood as "useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17) rather than a "magic book, utterly unlike other books and dropped from heaven to reveal mysterious things."⁶⁶ Communion requires communication across diverse cultures, as well as communication between text and context.⁶⁷

What has emerged from the study is a recognition of the need for diversity not only according to local church expression but also according to local need. Four key considerations illustrate that this gap must be bridged if it is not to be detrimental to the shared witness of Anglicanism.

Firstly, cross-Communion Scriptural engagement can only be successfully facilitated where there is an understanding of the breadth of different methods. A sympathetic awareness of the breadth of different hermeneutical and pedagogical methods across Anglicanism guards against an implicit preference by those facilitating cross-Communion Scriptural engagement to work entirely within their own paradigms.

Similarly, a sharing of approaches across the Communion allows them to be tested in differing situations and their presuppositions critically evaluated afresh. Assumptions may be theologically, ideologically or culturally constructed and at worst may shape readings of Scripture which are inflexible and effectively predetermined. The benefit of this sharing is not necessarily the modification of methodologies themselves but rather the increase in self-awareness and reflection among their practitioners within the context of an approach "grounded in prayer and seeking to foster friendship."⁶⁸

⁶³ C. Rowland, B. Rees, and R. Weston, "Practical Exegesis in Context," in *Bible and Practice*, ed. C. Rowland and J. Vincent (Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit, 2001), 11.

⁶⁴ North America Regional Group, *BiLC*, 4-5.

⁶⁵ R. C. Van Leeuwen, "Reading the Bible whole in a culture of divided hearts," *Ex auditu* 19, no. (2003): 11.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*: 6.

⁶⁷ Holgate and Starr, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 89.

⁶⁸ Davis, "*The Bible in the Life of the Sudanese Church*": A report submitted to the Anglican Communion Office, 7.

The third reason for bridging this gap builds on the concerns of the second, but perhaps casts them in a more positive light: the insights of unknown approaches may be given expression in new contexts. Alien methodologies might well offer something positive to parts of the Communion in which they were previously unknown. The various reports of the Bible in the Life of the Church project all identify a great diversity within, not just between, the different regions and insightful approaches from other parts of the Communion might well translate more directly into this dynamic diversity than traditionally inherited 'local' approaches.

Finally, a variety of hermeneutical and pedagogical methodologies can be put into fruitful conversation. Using a multiplicity of approaches not only caters for a diversity of participants but may also generate new understandings and insights which extend beyond the established fruits of singular methodologies:

... The Bible and practice are in a dynamic relationship or conversation. It is a lively interaction. It is clear that there can be no formula or strict logical framework between them. In theological terms, this is an arena for the work of God's Spirit...⁶⁹

Such a dynamic also offers a wide and generous invitation across the Communion to mutual contribution and engagement across theological boundaries as well as Provincial. As with all invitations, however, its success invariably depends on the openness of the response.

Gap between different hermeneutical horizons

The final gap identified by the project is that created by the preferred hermeneutical horizons different readers bring to Scriptural engagement. The metaphor of 'hermeneutical horizons' has been developed and represented according to a number of different models and has become "almost a cliché in discussions of biblical hermeneutics."⁷⁰ The concept was first introduced and described by German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer as:

the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth.⁷¹

According to Gadamer's original conception there is essentially only one horizon which frames events, texts, artefacts, and so forth into a particular perspective, which is itself constantly shifting.⁷² Within this single horizon readers have a preference to project an historical, textual or contextual horizon. These preferences were evident in the project where some readers engaged with questions of the historical world presented by the text, others with the *prima facie* witness of the words of the text itself, and still others attempting to connect the text with their own contemporary contexts.⁷³ Self-awareness of this

⁶⁹ I. Duffield, "From Bible to Ministry Projects," in *Bible and Practice*, ed. C. Rowland and J. Vincent (Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit, 2001), 75.

⁷⁰ R. Nicholls, *Walking on the Water: Reading Mt. 14:22-33 in the light of its Wirkungsgeschichte*, Biblical interpretation series, (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 7.

⁷¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975), 301.

⁷² Nicholls, *Walking on the Water*, 9.

⁷³ A. Village, *The Bible and lay people: an empirical approach to ordinary hermeneutics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 26.

preference shifts the relationship between the reader and their previous understanding, whereby the present and projected horizons fuse.⁷⁴ This fusion results in an enhanced clarity of interpretation and understanding:

... The task of historical understanding also involves acquiring an appropriate historical horizon, so that what we are trying to understand can be seen in its true dimensions...⁷⁵

Anthony Thiselton continues this exploration particularly through his two works *The Two Horizons* (1980) and *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (1992). Thiselton departs slightly from Gadamer in understanding the different horizons as of the same nature and so the process of understanding is envisaged as "... communication between two sets of horizons"⁷⁶ rather than the setting of a particular perspective within its wider framework. Gaps are accentuated between our horizon and the text's through a number of factors including history, culture, philosophy and language.⁷⁷

The 2004 *Windsor Report*, which provided the mandate for the Bible in the Life of the Church project, identifies the consequence of this inability in Scriptural engagement to move from one horizon preference to another:

...A mention of scripture today can sometimes seem actually divisive, so aware are we of the bewildering range of available interpretative strategies and results. This is tragic, since, as with the Spirit who inspired scripture, we should expect that the Bible would be a means of unity, not division. In fact, our shared reading of scripture across boundaries of culture, region and tradition ought to be the central feature of our common life, guiding us together into an appropriately rich and diverse unity by leading us forward from entrenched positions into fresh appreciation of the riches of the gospel as articulated in the scriptures...⁷⁸

According to the Windsor Report, rather than strengthening and edifying the Anglican body, the reading and use of the Bible would seem instead to have become pointedly divisive. What results from this failure is less opportunity to appreciate the depth of Scripture's witness and a danger of moulding it to suit a preconceived agenda, divesting it of any prophetic potentiality. An ignorance of hermeneutical horizons may well contribute to the detriment of Anglican communion as individuals and groups become increasingly fixed in their preferred horizons and the use of the Bible only exacerbates the breakdown in unity and communication as different perspectives on and interpretations of Scripture are unable to be reconciled.

Conclusion

Inherent in each of these gaps is the holding in tension of distinctive

⁷⁴ Nicholls, *Walking on the Water*, 11.

⁷⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 302.

⁷⁶ A. C. Thiselton, *The two horizons : New Testament hermeneutics and philosophical description with special reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980), 168.

⁷⁷ H. A. Virkler, Karelyne Gerber, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 19.

⁷⁸ The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *Windsor Report*, § 62.

hermeneutical principles. Failure to appreciate these tensions results in a relational impasse where different interpretations of Scripture across the Communion cannot be reconciled. To 'mind' the gaps involves not only the protection of this tension, but also a conscious 'mindfulness' of hermeneutical presuppositions and influences. Critical and reflective self-awareness has been a key component in discussion of each of the gaps, offering possibilities for these tensions to be held and conversations to continue.

The project refers to the 'fruits of study' and seems to equate this with the outcomes of interpretation. Such a mindset, however, presupposes a method of Scriptural engagement which utilises the Bible as a kind of moral and theological quarry from which to mine nuggets of truth. If Scripture is to shape a Communion which seeks to be formed by Biblical encounter and witness then the 'fruits' of this engagement ought to encompass much more than simply the history of a text's interpretation in narrow propositional terms. 'Fruits' are the product of nurture, growth and careful cultivation. This approach values the entire history of a text's impact across the hermeneutical horizon and so values the process of Scriptural engagement as formational and transformational for the Christian community. Such an approach also complements traditional Anglican ecclesial polity with its emphasis on collaborative discernment, interdependence and commitment to the process of reception in the wake of contentious decisions.

The hermeneutical gaps identified by the project, if left unexamined or ignored, may well be detrimental to Anglican relational unity in communion. However, neither should the gaps be obliterated by attempting to forge or impose a singular Anglican hermeneutic. Instead, Anglicans must learn to 'Mind the Gap': fostering connections between the 'academy' and the 'pew' in the way the Bible is read; appreciating the insights of both Scripture and other sources of wisdom across a range of contemporary issues; engaging with the challenge and particularity of discrete Scriptural texts while putting them into conversation with the entire Biblical witness as received in a diversity of contexts; sharing different hermeneutical and pedagogical methodologies; and, moving between hermeneutical horizons. This is an approach which values the process and task of Scriptural engagement as essential to the nurturing and growth of the fruits which are its product. It is also an approach which offers some opportunity and hope that the "hermeneutical gaps" identified by the Bible in the Life of the Church project may not necessarily be detrimental to Anglican 'communion'.

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