

The Global Anglican Communion and the Anglican Orthodoxy



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It is a daunting task to be asked to define orthodoxy¹. Such a task has occupied the minds of great theologians and councils throughout Christian history, and I consider myself hardly up to the task. However, in looking to the future of Global Anglicanism, it is necessary to put one's hand to the plough and begin a furrow.

The need to define or describe Anglican orthodoxy today has an urgency about it, because of the actions of the Episcopal Church (TEC) and other Provinces of the Communion in blessing homosexuality against the clear teaching of Scripture, the historic Church and the Resolution of the Lambeth Conference 1998. Although this issue has dominated discussions, it is clear that it is symptomatic of a larger abandonment of biblical teaching and authority on fundamental matters of the faith. The fact that Bishop John Spong, a man who has denied virtually every article of the Christian faith, continues a bishop in good standing in TEC, while orthodox bishops are threatened with deposition for their witness speaks for itself.

Global Anglican Orthodoxy: A Blueprint

I have chosen to adapt an essay I wrote in 2006 titled "The Global Anglican Communion: A Blueprint."² This essay sought to outline the essential elements necessary to an orthodox Anglican Communion Covenant which would serve both to correct the errors present in the Communion and to guide the Communion into the future.

The blueprint follows the framework of the Lambeth Quadrilateral. This formulary emerged from the General Convention of the Episcopal Church meeting in Chicago in 1886 and was intended as an ecumenical statement among the many American denominations and was adopted by the young Lambeth Conference in 1888 as an expression of what we now call Anglicanism³. In my view, it can continue to inform a worldwide fellowship of Anglicans and at the same time offer an ecumenical platform from which to seek unity with other Christian churches. Although the Quadrilateral is not a sufficient statement of Christian doctrine, it does contain the theological DNA which can guide us in articulating our ecclesial identity,

along with the Articles of Religion and the Book of Common Prayer. Together these formularies offer a kind of “branding” for Anglican bodies in their various social contexts.

Finally, let me suggest for strategic and tactical reasons that a statement of Anglican orthodoxy keep in close touch with the idea of a Covenant. Strategically the idea of a Covenant is a good one. The Quadrilateral itself was a kind of preamble to Anglican orthodoxy for the emerging Communion. Going back even further, one might suggest that the Articles of Religion were part of an Anglican Covenant before there was a Communion, as Thomas Cranmer intended the Articles to form the basis for an ecumenical consensus among the churches of the Reformation⁴.

The idea of an Anglican Covenant is also relevant in the present political context of the Communion. Those attending the Global Anglican Future Conference should maintain ties with those orthodox leaders who are working on the Communion Covenant. It seems unlikely that a final Covenant from Canterbury, filtered now through the Anglican Consultative Council, will be sufficiently crisp to deal with the present crisis. However, the opportunity may arise hereafter to negotiate an ecumenical Anglican Covenant that will serve as a means of warding off heresy and will chart the future of orthodox Anglicanism.

The Role of Scripture in the Church

The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, as the revealed Word of God (CLQ), containing all things necessary to salvation,” and as being the rule and standard of faith.

It hardly needs repeating that the foremost objection of the Global South churches to the homosexual agenda is the fact that it is “contrary to Scripture” (Lambeth 1.10) and that this spurning of the Bible as “God’s Word written” has infected the entire structure of authority within the most “progressive” churches of the Anglican Communion. Recovering Anglican orthodoxy must therefore include a restoration of Scripture to its rightful place of authority. I propose the following classic traits of Scripture as benchmarks of a restored biblical orthodoxy.

The Primacy of Scripture. Lambeth 1998 passed Resolutions affirming the primacy, or the primary authority, of Scripture in matters relating to Christian faith and life⁵. Primacy is not a call for bare submission to a sacred text, as in Islam, but includes several closely associated principles.

* The Word as medium of the Gospel. The Reformation began with a dynamic sense of the recovery of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a verbal revelation, originating in God Himself as the Word (John 1:1-18). Hence the primary medium of communication is “preaching the Gospel” (Romans 10:14).

* The self-authenticating character of Scripture. Although the Bible is an accommodated form of God’s revelation, God “lispering” to us (as Calvin put it), it is self-authenticating and

cannot be “proved” by human science or Church edict.

* Scripture as a means of grace. The Word of God presented in Scripture convicts and evokes faith in hearers. The same Spirit that guided the authors testifies in the heart of readers⁶.

The Unity of Scripture. The Reformation also declared that, despite the differences within and between the Testaments, a fundamental consistency undergirds the various books of the Bible.

* Mystery and unity. As God’s triune nature is a transcendent mystery made known in the fullness of time (1 John 1:1-4), so biblical unity can include paradox and progressive development, without causing confusion in its overall message.

* Hermeneutical center. The center of the Bible is the Gospel of Christ himself. A biblical theology must be evangelical, acknowledging the role of the Old Testament as preparation and of the New Testament as fulfillment, avoiding Old Testament-based legalism or New Testament-based libertinism.

* Harmony of Scripture texts. The principle of “Scripture interpreting Scripture” is found in Cranmer’s Collect which urges ordinary Christians to “mark” i.e., compare, various passages in the Bible. As for the Church, it may not “so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another” (Article XX).

The Clarity of Scripture. The clarity of Scripture was the basis on which the Reformers insisted on a vernacular Bible that could be read and understood by the simplest “ploughboy.”

* Simplicity of Scripture. The Reformers recovered the “plain sense” (*sensus literalis*) of the Bible⁷. Simplicity is not anti-intellectual. In fact, it is an invitation to study original languages and historical and social context.

* External and internal clarity. Scripture is transparent, not a secret Gnostic document. External clarity is the way Scripture conveys the Word publicly to all who would come with a seeking heart. Because of the hardness of the human heart, internal clarity is required through the grace of the Holy Spirit. One must “have ears to hear.”

* Exposition. “How can I understand unless I have an interpreter?” (Acts 8:31). Bible reading must be accompanied by expository preaching and teaching. Even mature Christians move “from the truth to the whole truth” through regular Bible study⁸.

The Sufficiency of Scripture. The idea of the “sufficiency” of Scripture asserts both its unique efficacy and its limited focus.

* The End of Scripture – salvation. Sufficiency looks to the end or *telos* of Scripture, which is salvation in Christ alone (John 20:31). Any Church which is ashamed of this salvation cannot be using Scripture rightly.

* Appropriation by faith. Just as the Spirit gives inward clarity, so the means by which

salvation is grasped is faith alone. Only then does reason interpret Scripture and works of love apply it.

* Trustworthiness of Scripture. Unlike human councils (Article XIX), Scripture cannot err in the sense that it is an infallible guide to salvation and a holy life. In this it diverges both from liberal caricatures and fundamentalist simplifications of fallibility and inerrancy.

In addition to an exposition of the nature of biblical authority, the Global Anglican Communion will need to grapple with the interpretation of Scripture. Again, we should draw on the resources of the Reformation, in its goal of recovering the “plain and canonical” sense of God’s Word, which is accessible for preaching, teaching and mission. At the same time, the contemporary crisis has raised issues of philosophical hermeneutics which must be addressed. The recent work of Kevin Vanhoozer, for instance, opens an avenue for developing a faithful mode of understanding Scripture as “God’s communicative action.”⁹

Finally, global Anglicanism needs to revisit the so-called Anglican tripod of Scripture, Tradition and Reason. While a tripod of three equal legs is an historical fiction and a theological Trojan horse, there is need for a reaffirmation and redefinition of the consonance of Scripture, tradition and reason, as articulated so pithily by Richard Hooker:

Be it in matter of one kind or of the other, what Scripture doth plainly deliver, to that the first place both of credit and obedience is due; the next whereunto is whatsoever any man can necessarily conclude by force of reason; after these the voice of the Church succeedeth. (Laws V.8.2)¹⁰

A renewed study, and in places critique, of Richard Hooker is called for in finding a way forward.

The Church’s Historic Formularies

The Apostles’ Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol (LQ); and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.

“The voice of the Church,” as Hooker put it, has always been important for an Anglican Christianity that sees itself as part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church upholding “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3)¹¹. Reformation Anglicans tended to look to particular classic periods as sources of authority, such as the first five centuries and four Councils. At the same time, they adopted confessional statements that addressed the new insights of Scripture study and the pressing needs of the day.

The present crisis in Anglicanism provides the opportunity to recover a modest and ecumenical confessionalism that takes into account the Great Tradition of Christian theology and adapts and applies its truths to the contemporary situation. Our Anglican heritage affords us rich resources in the Thirty-Nine Articles and Book of Common Prayer. At

the same time, new challenges to orthodoxy have arisen requiring precise analysis and redefinition, such as the nature of marriage and human sexuality, the rise of modern science and technology and the place of other religions in God's economy of salvation. I speak of modest confessionalism in the sense of a confession that guides without closing off legitimate dialogue and testing from Scripture, and ecumenical confessionalism as presenting an opportunity for the historic churches of West and East to seek together the mind of God as they face off against militant secularism on one flank and militant Islam on the other.

In his recent book *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, Prof. Thomas Oden argues that Africa – and he means ancient Alexandria down to present-day sub-Saharan Africa – provides both the best rationale of “right remembering” of the apostles’ teaching but also the best examples of martyrdom, “where ordinary believers were unwilling to release their Scriptures to governing authorities who might debase them.”^{12]}

The Church's Mission and Sacraments

The two Sacraments – Baptism and the Supper of the Lord - ministered with unfailing use of Christ's words of Institution and of the elements ordained by Him.

A review and reform of Anglican doctrine should not omit the nature and role of sacraments. Sacramental theology has to some extent divided orthodox Anglicans, e.g., Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics, and one may wonder whether a renewed debate or a papering over of these differences will lead to new life. Undoubtedly renewed discussion of the nature and efficacy of the sacraments is called for among those who agree on biblical essentials.

As a small contribution to such a discussion, I would propose that sacraments should be understood within a theology of mission. The Reformation in general and the Church of England in particular seem to have been deficient in articulating a proper theology of mission. For all their virtues, the Articles of Religion have no single reference to Christ's Great Commission to evangelize the nations¹³. Likewise, Articles neglected the Person and work of the Holy Spirit, and the Established Church often marginalized or expelled movements of “enthusiasm.” Indeed, much of the work of mission societies has been accomplished in spite of rather than with the full support of the mother Church.

In the context of state churches, the sacraments have often been regarded as rights and rites of national identity. This was not true in the apostolic church, nor does it work today (e.g., what does it mean that the Church of England claims 26 million members?). So I propose we take a dynamic approach to the Gospel sacraments, an approach which I believe is found in the Pentecostal teaching of the apostles (Acts 2:38-47). From this preaching I think we can identify the following marks of the missionary church¹⁴:

* The Church preaches the Gospel to its own children and to those who are far off - to the churched and unchurched, to the youth of the next generation and to those whom we today call “unreached peoples.”

* It calls people urgently to be saved from the idols of the present age in expectation of the imminent return of Christ.

* Baptism is a response to preaching, and it signs and seals individuals as members of the Body of Christ.

* It expects believers individually and the whole Church corporately to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

* It expects and experiences healing and miracles in its midst.

* It is growing in numbers, often with remarkable leaps forward.

* It is devoted to apostolic doctrine, koinonia, worship and Eucharist.

* It is committed to radical sharing of goods and hospitality.

* It respects authority (the temple) but circumscribes that authority in view of the ascension and reign of Christ.

If the Anglican Communion can orient itself to our Lord’s Great Commission to make disciples of all nations, perhaps it can also reorient its sacramental heritage to convey the eschatological presence of Christ with his Church¹⁵. Another gap in Anglican theology and practice – not unconnected with its lack of missionary zeal, I suspect – is the conviction that Jesus Christ will return, suddenly and imminently, to judge the living and the dead¹⁶. As eschatological signs, the sacraments should be seen as incandescent badges of Christian identity: incandescent both in the sense of aglow with the Spirit but also as antagonistic to the world. Global Anglican orthodoxy will need to look not only for faithful administration of Gospel sacraments but for signs of the Spirit and power that accompany it (Mark 16:15-18)¹⁷.

Anglican Ecclesiology

The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church.

The present crisis in the Anglican Communion has revealed a constitutional weakness in its doctrine of the Church, its ecclesiology. In response to a blatant attack on the apostolic faith, the worldwide Body and its “Instruments of Unity” have proved unable to enforce straightforward discipline of heretical members. This failure has led many to conclude that Anglicanism is fundamentally flawed, and they have departed for other bodies.

We must start by admitting that global Anglican polity has leaned far too heavily on the benevolent patriarchy of the Established Church and the British Empire. The idea that a rapidly expanding body of Global South churches must be governed from a historic See

dominated by a secular Government and a compromised mother church is, to be blunt, a dangerous exercise of nostalgia.

Does this mean that the historic episcopate is itself obsolete? I do not think so. Anglicans can rightly uphold episcopal governance and the value of the historic continuity of its ministry, even as they uphold the priesthood of all believers. For all the failures of bishops, we cannot blame the office; indeed we can argue that a rightly ordered episcopacy has provided stability and faithfulness over the centuries and is often emulated by free-church leaders. The second clause of the Quadrilateral – “locally adapted” – qualifies a rigid view of prelacy and specifically relates it to global mission, “the varying needs of nations and peoples called” into the Church. As an example of the latter, one thinks of the Church of Nigeria’s strategy of sending missionary bishops into under-evangelized portions of its own dioceses, or even of another jurisdiction¹⁸.

The primary role of a bishop is that of a willing and apt pastor-teacher (Ephesians 4:11; 1 Peter 5:2; 2 Timothy 2:24). Bishops are to be stewards (Titus 1:7), which means they bear the final accountability for the state of the Church. To be sure, episcopal authority is not the same as episcopal totalitarianism – an attitude which many Global South churches need to address. The “household of God” which the bishop oversees (1 Timothy 3:4-5) is a “mixed regime” with subsidiary units – congregations, parishes, dioceses and officers, clergy and lay – which must be represented in its governing structures.

We must rethink the role of bishops and polity at the Communion level. Just as national politics and international politics operate on different levels, so also it is right that national churches have autonomy within an overarching framework an international covenant. Much of the work of the church should be “locally adapted,” although we should acknowledge that the electronic communications revolution has brought these local contexts much closer together than heretofore.

This pattern of episcopal governance can function at the level of worldwide Anglicanism. This will involve reform, though not total rejection, of the current Instruments of Unity, including the following elements:

- * A synod of bishops should meet regularly (decennially) and have authority to address matters of doctrine, discipline and mission.
- * An executive body of Primates should be authorized to carry out the will of the synod in between meetings.
- * A presiding Primate should serve as a focus of unity. Canterbury or another historic see could function as a locus of unity as well. However, such a Primate should be elected by the synod of bishops.
- * A secretariat should assist these Instruments, with accountability to all. The current Anglican Consultative Council and Anglican Communion Office have failed to function in this way.

In one sense, this polity is not far removed from the “Instruments of Unity” that have evolved of late in the historic Anglican Communion. The likeness may be deceptive: a diseased body may look like a healthy body, at least in the earlier stages of the illness. I am saying that the fault is not with the outward form of the Anglican Communion but with the doctrinal deviation from its apostolic and Reformation origins. Orthodoxy by its very nature must identify and renounce heresy and discipline false teachers, as a last resort, expel them¹⁹. If the Canterbury-based Anglican Communion continues to tolerate heresy in its midst and welcome false teachers to its councils, then the day will come when an orthodox assembly must break communion with Canterbury and set up alternative structures. Since the trend-lines seem to doom the current Communion to endless compromise or worse, the sooner the shadow structures begin to take form the better.

Finally, the global Anglican Communion will need to evaluate the role of the churches in relation to the secular realm. This is classic problem of political theology. Traditional patterns, such as the Established churches are obsolete. At the same time, new models proposed by liberation theology have proved ineffective. I think the political theology of Oliver O'Donovan, while not spelling out specific solutions, offers a framework for developing a theology of church and state under the Lordship of the ascended Christ²⁰.

The Spirit and Future of Anglican Orthodoxy

Like any blueprint, the above-mentioned elements of Anglican orthodoxy merely define the principles and structure of a reformed Anglican orthodoxy. Without the structure, it is unlikely that the life of the Communion will long endure. But at the same time, without the Spirit speaking to and working through the churches and their members, such a blueprint will be an empty vessel.

It is not for me to try to capture the wind of the Spirit in a bottle. But I would suggest that Anglican orthodoxy should be:

- * Bold in proclamation and clever in apologetics
- * Visionary in mission outreach
- * Prayerful in all things
- * Ecumenical in openness to brothers and sisters in Christ
- * Vigilant in guarding the faith and awaiting the return of the Lord

I have attempted to sketch a blueprint of a Global Anglican orthodoxy that will embody the best elements of our tradition and mobilize Anglicans to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. I believe that if the Global South churches and their allies will take bold action at this time, we shall see a new reformation in the Anglican tradition, one which reflects the movement of the Spirit of God in our day. If these churches, like the Church of Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11), remain faithful, Christ will give abundant life. Jesus Christ is Lord and His

kingdom reigns over all. The gates of hell will not prevail against His Church, which is His Body. Once we lift up our eyes from our own troubles and look at the worldwide scene, we shall realize that the Gospel is not in retreat but is beckoning to the uttermost corners of the globe. As Anglicans we have a stake in the global mission of Christ, and we have something to offer it from the riches of our heritage and our worldwide fellowship of churches.

Brothers and sisters, remember Lot's wife. The present order is passing away. Behold the Global Anglican Communion is coming.

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¹ There is even need to justify the "orthodoxy" as the chief term of reference in this case. Clearly Anglican orthodoxy is to be differentiated from Eastern Orthodoxy. It has been chosen as being broad enough to include various groups of Anglicans – Evangelical, Anglo-Catholic and Charismatic – who agree on the essentials of the faith. At the same time "orthodoxy" recalls the position of those in the patristic period who identified and contended against its opposite, heresy.

² The best available version (written and oral) of this address can be found at <http://www.mereanglicanism.com/presentations.htm>

³ The versions of the "Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral (CLQ) and the text approved by Lambeth (LQ) are slightly different.

⁴ Cranmer's design for the Church of England included reformed Articles, Common Prayer and Canons. See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) pages 500-513.

⁵ In Resolution III.1, the Conference "reaffirms the primary authority of the Scriptures, according to their testimony and supported by our own historic formularies." In Resolution III.5, "The Authority of the Holy Scriptures," it likewise "affirms that our creator God, transcendent as well as immanent, communicates with us authoritatively through the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments; and in agreement with the Lambeth Quadrilateral, and in solidarity with the Lambeth Conference of 1888, affirms that these Holy Scriptures contain 'all things necessary to salvation' and are for us the 'rule and ultimate standard' of faith and practice."

⁶ In Uganda, the first Christian converts were called “readers” as the Bible was the first text to become authoritative in an otherwise oral culture.

⁷ The meaning of “literal sense” has been revived in contemporary hermeneutics. I defended its use before the House of Bishops in 1992. See “Reading the Bible as the Word of God,” in *The Bible’s Authority for Today’s Church*, ed. Frederick H. Borsch (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International: 1993) pages 133-167.

⁸ This phrase is borrowed from Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) pages 50-51. It suggests that the biblical writers were capable of conveying a plain sense which leads the reader into a deeper consideration of its meaning without overturning its surface meaning.

⁹ See esp. *Is There Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), and *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2002) which lay the groundwork for his dogmatic work, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005). See my review, “Post Conservatives and Post-Liberals: Reflections on Kevin Vanhoozer’s *The Drama of Doctrine*,” at <http://www.stephenswitness.com>

¹⁰ Note that Hooker’s “credit and obedience” includes both theological dogmas but also what the Articles call the “Commandments called moral.” The idea that one could affirm the Creeds while disobeying the Commandments is foreign to classic Anglicanism.

¹¹ Note that the oneness of the Church is based on the “once-for-allness” (hapax) of the apostolic tradition entrusted to it.

¹² *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2007) page 128. In this quotation, Oden is thinking of North Africans like Cyprian, but one cannot help but remember the Uganda martyrs as well.

¹³ Granted, Article XVIII states that “Holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the name of Jesus Christ whereby men must be saved.” Still, the context of the Article seems to suggest doctrinal contention rather than missionary impulse.

¹⁴ Curiously, the “Covenant for Communion in Mission” also has nine bullets. Only one of these, the sharing of goods, appears in both lists. The missio dei theology of this document emphasizes the “love, justice and joy which Jesus inaugurated” rather than His salvation from sin and death, as appears primary in Peter’s sermon.

¹⁵ O’Donovan, *On Thirty-Nine Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity* (Leicester: Paternoster Press, 1986), page 126.

¹⁶ Note the omission of Cranmer’s articles on eschatology (#39-42).

¹⁷ Even if the longer ending of Mark is not original, it indicates the linking of sacraments with mission in the early church.

¹⁸ It is ironic that as Lambeth 2008 addresses “bishops in mission,” the one Province that has most successfully equipped bishops for mission will be absent. However, it is likely that Nigeria’s experience of missionary bishops would not be heeded any more than its lessons in the Decade of Evangelism.

¹⁹ Note in this regard that the current crisis does not involve Bishop Gene Robinson so much as those in TEC who elected, confirmed and ordained him, knowing that his life was openly homosexual.

²⁰ O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).