



The Doctrine Commission Of the Anglican Church of Australia

Response to Questions from the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission

The Doctrine Commission of the Anglican Church of Australia is far from monochrome in its theological position. Indeed, we are perhaps as diverse as any in the Anglican Communion, spanning the full spectrum from liberal to conservative evangelical. As such, on some matters the commission does not speak with a common voice.

In some matters, we recognise that it is a fruitless task to seek a unanimously agreed decision or statement, because to reach such a point would require either ambiguity or compromise that would only serve to mask the points of disagreement. Instead, in these areas of disagreement, the commission allows itself to speak with multiple voices. The response of the commission is, at times, several unmerged voices (which might take the form of several essays, each in the name of, and representing the position of, its author). Our approach represents a commitment to the process of open and frank dialogue (which requires a freedom to articulate and defend a position, and a concomitant commitment to listen and engage in honest debate with our Christian brothers and sisters on the commission).

It is this commitment to dialogue that has shaped the form of this response. What follows is in the nature of a dialogue between two members of the doctrine commission who have representative but different viewpoints. The fruit of this dialogue is that it highlights both the extent of our common ground, and its limits. The first response to each question was written by Rev. Dr Scott Cowdell, a parish priest and theologian based in Canberra who would describe himself as 'liberal catholic'. This is then followed by a reply from Dr Peter Jensen (which has been italicised for the sake of differentiation).

Peter Jensen

The Most Rev. Dr Peter Jensen
Chairman of the Doctrine Commission of the Anglican Church of Australia

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1. Anglicanism has always given a high place to the reading of Scripture as the ground of its worship and teaching. How is it possible for Anglicans in different parts of the world to listen to the Bible together?

A Response by Dr Scott Cowdell

The problem here is that two streams within Anglicanism have differing views on how the Bible is to be interpreted, and how fidelity to the Bible is demonstrated. The issue of same-gender unions and the ordination of partners in such unions is becoming the new article by which the Church stands or falls. Both sides are critical of the other's biblical interpretation, while the liberals' or liberal catholics' fidelity to the Bible is widely questioned by the conservatives.

In response to this state of affairs, the acknowledgement of significant common ground will help avert further division. Hence we propose eight principles of biblical interpretation and fellowship in fidelity to the word of God upon which we, as representatives of a diversity of Anglican traditions, can agree.

1. All who interpret the Bible must acknowledge the influence of their own particular tradition on that interpretation, including the prioritising of certain outcomes (e.g. valuing individual freedom, as against the maintenance of clear gender boundaries).
2. The Bible calls all Christian traditions into judgement and searches the heart of every faithful interpreter.
3. Same-sex activity, however understood, is no more serious than other sins listed in the ethical codes of the New Testament, which are understood to be destructive of the Church's life and unacceptable to God (see e.g. 1 Cor 6: 9-11). This entails that militant liberals must acknowledge that unfettered self-expression in sexual matters is not an absolute good consistent with the Bible's logic of Christian discipleship, while militant conservatives must acknowledge that singling out homosexuality for condemnation in a sinful Church is to risk limiting the whole counsel of God.
4. There is a need for representatives on both sides of this debate to repent of ill-using the Bible: in the global North, liberal Anglican elites must not underestimate the counter-cultural authority of the Bible, while in the global South, and especially in conservative, post-colonial Churches, the self-assertive use of the Bible as a cultural equaliser in debates with the North must be abandoned as an unworthy abuse of the word of God.
5. The Bible is not monochrome, canonising a diversity of voices and a pattern of developing understanding of the one God in relationship with God's chosen people.
6. It is the consistent witness of the Bible that the worst sins are contempt for others among the people of God and, hence, for the God who has chosen us—"But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness" (1 John 2: 11). This warning needs to be heeded by liberals contemptuous of conservatives in our Church, and by conservatives likewise (so, for instance, the assertion by a leader of 'Reform' that Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, is an atheist is to be entirely deplored).
7. The consistent biblical impetus and call toward the unity of God's people is at least as important as its impetus and call toward the purification of God's people, so that retaining our unified witness in the face of this dispute can be seen as an act of fidelity to God's call, rather than a betrayal of that call.
8. Evangelicals who take a view of the Church as episodic and event-like, gathered in heaven but never fully on earth, and catholic-minded Anglicans who take a more sacramental, institutional view of the Church can both find scriptural warrant for their views. Accordingly, those of us who place less emphasis on the visible unity of the Church should acknowledge the biblical case for that unity and tread warily on the precipice of division,

while those who favour the visible unity of the Church must acknowledge that unity is not the only biblical imperative.

The leadership of senior conservatives and senior ‘progressives’ in the Anglican Communion will be needed if this acknowledgement of fitness and fidelity in biblical interpretation is to be acknowledged in opponents. In effect, this is a call for extending the notion of ‘two integrities’, which informs our thought and practice over women priests. Thus, while we differ, nevertheless we acknowledge that faithful biblical interpretation and fidelity to Scripture is present in the camp of our opponents—liberals will not accuse conservatives of unsophistication or wholly politicised motives, while conservatives will not accuse liberals of unscriptural godlessness.

A Reply by Dr Peter Jensen

It is fair to say that, across the diversity of our various positions, we all agree that the scriptural texts have a uniquely normative and authoritative place for us as Anglican Christians. In one sense, that agreement does not get us very far, because as soon as we begin to talk about what this means in practice, a conservative will understand this statement in terms of the high view of Scripture as classically expressed in the Thirty Nine articles –that the Scripture are ‘God’s word written’ (Art. 20), that they contain all things necessary for salvation (Art. 6), that Christian doctrine must arise from and be proved by the teaching of Scripture (Art. 6), that the Church has no authority to teach or implement anything which is contrary to Scripture (Art. 20), and that Scripture must be expounded in such a way that no one passage is presented as ‘repugnant to another’ (Art. 20). A liberal would not make these same affirmations, instead understanding the Scriptures as one voice (albeit a dominant one) in a continuing conversation which encompasses tradition, reason, experience, culture and theological reflection.

However, in another sense, the limited agreement which we do share about the scriptural texts is very important. We agree that the Scriptures speak with an authoritative voice, which has important implications for the kinds of hermeneutical approaches open to us in the (Anglican) Christian tradition. A hermeneutic in which the reader is the final arbiter of meaning, or in which one’s interpretive tradition necessarily determines meaning, is inconsistent with our common understanding of the Scriptures. We would alike agree that our aim is to hear the voice of the Scriptures, not to supplant that voice with our own. Similarly, while we acknowledge the influence of our respective interpretive traditions, these traditions are not so binding (or blinding) as to prevent us from coming to a real (if only partial) reading of a text, as opposed to a reflection of our own tradition. (i.e. our traditions are a lens, not a mirror). Others who do not share our commitment to Scripture’s authoritative voice are open to pursue – for example – acknowledged ideological rereadings of Scripture, but for us, this is not an option. Since our aim is to listen to the Bible, we are limited to hermeneutical approaches consistent with this.

When it comes to interpreting the text of Scripture, we agree that any part of the Bible needs to be read in the context of the whole. For example, the book of Proverbs voices a very optimistic view of wisdom, which is nuanced by the voices in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes. A biblical doctrine of wisdom requires a reading-together of all three.

Our shared aim is to interpret the Bible, recognising the inspiration and clarity of Scripture. Where that aim is pursued with integrity, there is room for some difference of opinion, which we recognise as something stemming from the limits of human knowledge. In epistemic humility, we will listen to each other, and learn from each other, and avoid all subterfuge and obfuscation in debate. In this way, we can listen to the Bible together. But our aim should be to find the strongest sense of agreement about the Biblical teaching, so that we may benefit from its clarity and authority.

2. The IATDC and the Windsor Report are both emphasising the notion of ‘covenant’ as a basis and expression of communion. If a covenant is more than a constitution, what implications does this have for decision-making by churches that are in a covenantal relationship to each other?

A Response by Dr Scott Cowdell

A covenant of the sort referred to here is an arrangement between essentially separate partners who decide to commit. It recognises advantage on both sides while maintaining the basic independence of the partners, and their right to separate if things don’t work out. It is like a marriage but without ‘til death do us part’. Indeed, it is a more like a marriage with a pre-nuptial agreement, where the bond is preceded by provision for its dissolution. A constitution on the other hand can be more positive, as it emerges from and formalises a relationship already existing.

Our Anglican bonds are historical, cultural, relational and holistic—we really do belong together already. The Anglican Communion represents a deeper bond than that of the Lutheran World Federation, for instance, which is a covenant between independent Churches. Such covenanted Churches share commonalities of culture and history, but their togetherness is not as integral as we Anglicans experience ours to be. Hence a covenant for us is superfluous. Families don’t need covenants. But constitutions may help them order and develop an existing relationship.

Those of us with an episodic or event-like view of the church on earth may warm more readily to the notion of covenant than those of us with a more catholic, sacramental view of the Church as an entity abiding across time and space, but the fact of our felt ties as Anglicans remains the crucial fact of our experience together.

If a member Church of our communion goes its separate way it loses something integral to being an Anglican Church. We have grown up as a family and the fact of our emerging and belonging together is at least as important in defining us as are the individual differences of our Churches. We have a relationship already, called together by God in one of the great Christian families, which everywhere benefits from constitutional arrangements but does not need to be created or recreated by covenant—‘those whom God has joined together, let no-one put asunder’!

A Reply by Dr Peter Jensen

There would seem to be little enthusiasm in the Australian church for the proposed ‘covenantal’ bond as a means of holding our church together.

This may stem from the fact that the kind of covenant proposed must necessarily be a formalized in juridical terms. The Anglican Church in Australia is already bound together in a legal sense (created in 1961 by our Constitution), but this formal arrangement in and of itself has done little to promote a real unity between the various Dioceses. We all recognise that there is a world of difference between a formal relationship and a personal relationship.

The particular notion of ‘covenant’ as expressed in previous communications of the IATDC and the Windsor Report is problematic. The problems surround both the notion itself and the form of such a covenant that has been put forward for consideration. The proposed covenant responds to a breach of fellowship created by doctrinal and moral decline from the recognised teaching of Scripture in a way which avoids a reaffirmation of that teaching and a call to repent. Yet the very notion of a covenant proposes a focus of relationship between the churches other than a common commitment to Christ and obedience to his word. If a commitment to adhere to the teaching of Scripture, and common ex animo assent to the Thirty-nine Articles have not been able to ensure either doctrinal orthodoxy or moral fidelity and thus genuine fellowship between the Anglican churches, why should we expect that the proposed covenant will fare any better?

Furthermore, it is not at all clear how the proposed covenant would have effect. It presupposes parallel constitutional structures in each province of the Communion. For instance, it is not at all clear who could agree to this new arrangement on behalf of the Anglican Church of Australia. The Primate has no such constitutional authority. Nor may the General Synod commit any individual diocese without the concurrence of that diocese.

3. How do you think the genuine and meaningful expressions of communion that your church experiences with Anglican Christians in other parts of the world will be able to survive current disagreements in the Anglican Communion?

A Response by Dr Scott Cowdell

Our challenge is not just a matter of strengthening our Anglican ‘Instruments of Unity’ (the conclusion of the Windsor Report) but to develop the instincts of mutual belonging and the respect of listening that are characteristic of our communion at its best and the clearest manifestation of our union. We respect each other’s Christianity and in our experience of one another’s ‘otherness’ we nevertheless discern the presence of God. Whether or not we are prepared to back off fixed positions, we nevertheless keep talking together, and that is our finest and most characteristic Christian witness.

This way of understanding our communion is the only thing that will keep those of us with a more episodic or event-based understanding of ecclesiology within the fold—no primatial structure or beefed-up Canon law will quell the Protestant impulse to ideological purity in our Church, but only the ineradicable conviction that the God we serve is also the God of our ideological opponents. Where ideologues of either persuasion prevail, and are not willing or spiritually able to discern their own God in the voices and demeanour of their opponents, then the gossamer of Anglican unity will be torn.

What we need is a bi-lateral climb down from the oppositional rhetoric of the global North/South divide, and the penitent recognition on both sides that God is too readily employed in justifying and prosecuting ideological causes that have more to do with political advantage and arrogant self-definition than with the God of Christ crucified, who eschews power games and other manifestations of ‘the wisdom of this world, which is passing away’. To this end, the witness of powerful, spiritually mature leaders and primates of the global South will be crucial.

A Reply by Dr Peter Jensen

To pick up Dr Cowdell’s earlier analogy, the worldwide Anglican church is a family. We are related to each other by shared ancestry, and (to a greater or lesser degree) we still reflect something of the family likeness. However, when a son of the family deliberately turns his back on all this and repudiates the family heritage, it cannot help but create tensions around the table at Christmas lunch. While that son still remains part of his family (or, as we might say, in communion), you could hardly say that he is a part of the active fellowship of that family. So too in our worldwide Anglican family, there are degrees of ‘communion’ which are a reflection of the extent of the real fellowship which we share.

The genuine and meaningful expressions of fellowship which evangelicals in the Australian Church enjoy with Anglicans in other parts of the world have largely been unaffected by current disagreements in the Anglican Communion. Those committed to upholding the teaching of Scripture in the areas of both doctrine and morality continue to support each other, especially those whose stance has put them at odds with the institutional structures in their part of the world. There is no reason to expect any of this to change.

4. What sort of language (theological or otherwise) is appropriate for speaking about Christian people with whom you disagree?

A Response by Dr Scott Cowdell

Seeking the mind of Christ in mutual respect, without rancour, is the Christian norm with which all of us would agree. The problem arises with disagreement beyond a certain threshold. Fellowship is not strained and anathemas are not invoked over 'things indifferent', in many areas of well-established Anglican difference. Thus we have found that even women's ordination has not placed unbearable strain on our communion, but that we have maintained our bond with 'two integrities' tolerated side by side.

But other issues have communion-breaking potential, namely blessing same-sex unions and the ordination of practising homosexuals, on the one hand, and lay presidency at the Eucharist on the other. For those of us concerned about same sex unions and ordinations, it is a matter of salvation itself and no faithful Church can either allow it or even condone these developments by association. For those of us concerned about lay presidency, by departing so drastically from our previous faith and order that our understanding of ministry and authority diverge, the act itself constitutes schism. In both cases, and for those on both sides of the arguments, the logic of belonging risks being torn and the bitter recourse of separation presents itself.

However, the sense of two integrities ought to be maintained even though in both cases a line has been crossed that (by and large) was not crossed over women priests. It is not appropriate to condemn conscientious, theologically-motivated protestants among us who advocate lay presidency, even though in opting for it they risk losing the essence of our ministerial order and stepping out of our Anglican family, as the more catholic-minded among us see it. Similarly, on the same-sex matter, our conservatives need to acknowledge that there is gospel purpose and not just cultural capitulation on the part of those of us who make a case for blessing same-sex unions and permitting the ordination of appropriate persons in such unions.

Senior leaders, both conservative and liberal, need to set a good example here and seek to restrain hotheads on both sides of the debate who wilfully misrepresent the positions of their opponents. Militant 'liberals' in America, intemperate spokespersons for 'Reform' in England and vocal conservative leaders in Africa all need to examine their motives in the light of the gospel.

The ability to recognise sanctity across the divide of churchmanship has not always succeeded for us. What a tragedy that the holiness of the word among Puritans and the priestly holiness of the sanctuary among Laudians could not recognise and acknowledge one another, nor the prophetic holiness of Wesley meeting the reticent, rational holiness of Bishop Butler. This is not the time for us Anglicans to repeat these mistakes of our forebears.

A Reply by Dr Peter Jensen

An awareness of our own capacity for error and failure impresses upon us the need to treat those with whom we disagree with courtesy. Furthermore, disagreements are of various kinds. Disagreements on matters of which Scripture does not speak bear a different character to disagreements over what Scripture is saying or over whether a particular doctrine or injunction is true and normative. Nevertheless, it is part of the faithfulness of the Christian pastor to both teach the truth and to refute error. We must be prepared to say 'No' as well as 'Yes'. In particular, a refusal to abide by the teaching of Scripture needs to be recognised as unfaithfulness.