

Who We Are and Where We Stand



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Do you remember Peter Sellers, creator of Dr. Strangelove and Inspector Clouseau, man of a thousand voices as they called him? He was once asked to record the whole Bible on disc, and he refused. "To do something like that," he said, "you need to know exactly who you are. I don't know who I am."

Do we know who we are? I think we do, and I will state what I think straight away. We are sinners, miserable and hell-deserving, saved by the glorious grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are orthodox biblical Christians, members of the worldwide Anglican Communion, who value the Anglican heritage of wisdom and faithful devotion, and who cannot in good conscience go along with the increasing slippage from Anglican standards of the Anglican Church of Canada. We are in fact increasingly isolated in our church, much as Jeremiah long ago was isolated in Jerusalem - and if we do not feel something of Jeremiah's distress at being so placed, I would say there is something wrong with us.

But we are so placed, and action is called for, and my aim in this talk is to ensure that we move ahead with clarity in our minds as to who we are, where we come from, what we are doing and why, and how to explain our action when we are challenged and criticized for it, as surely we shall be.

May I say: I tackle this talk with both a sense of compulsions and a heavy heart. When God called me from England to Canada three decades ago, I thought I was leaving behind the world of intra-church conflict in which I had been involved for twenty years, but no. In England, when Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones called on evangelicals ministering in doctrinally-mixed denominations to leave them, I resisted the idea. I did not expect that in Canada withdrawal from the diocese and province that had welcomed me would become an issue of conscience, but so it is. Like other Christians, I find peace in doing what I believe I have to

do, but I cannot always find pleasure in it, and this for me is an instance of that. However, I move now to my argument.

The Anglican Communion

The Anglican Communion is one expression of the church universal, militant here in earth, and this is where I start.

a. The Church of God

What is the church? I state what I believe to be the Bible's teaching. In its visible aspect - that is, as we see it in this world - the church is the entire community of those who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. This church is gathered in local assemblies, each of which, in the words of Anglican Article 19, is "a congregation" (that is, an association) of faithful men (that is, believing people). In its spiritual aspect, that is, in terms of its relationship to God, the church as a whole is three things together, corresponding to the three persons of the Holy Trinity. It is the family of the Father's adopted children; it is the body of the ascended, glorified and enthroned Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord; and it is the community, or fellowship of mutual love and service that is created and sustained by the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit draws us close to each other by drawing each of us close to Christ, and by so doing transforms God's children in character, animates Christ's body in ministry, and builds up each fellowship in love. Every congregation is called to live as an outcrop, microcosm, sample and specimen of the one holy universal fellowship.

b. The Church's unity

Paul analyses the church's given unity in terms of one body and one spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one family, and speaks of the resultant reality as "the unity of the Spirit," which all Christians must work to preserve "in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4: 3-6). So the unity of God's holy universal church is something to be recognized and expressed. Jesus' prayer in John 17: 21-23 that all his disciples may be one as he and the Father are one shows us how this is to be done. The Father and the Son are one in thought, in love, in mutual honour and in disciple-making purpose (they were on mission together, we may truly say, at the time when Jesus prayed, just before his cross). So, too, the church, which is already one in Christ, must express its unity in all appropriate forms of communication, communion, and cooperation.

Togetherness with other congregations is integral to expressing Christian unity, and two principles of organized togetherness have emerged down the centuries: the geographical, which expresses the purpose of covering a particular area with functioning congregations, and the denominational, which expresses the sense that one is a trustee for some truth or practice that is not universally accepted, but that all need for biblical fullness of life together, so that as many churches as possible that have this distinctive feature should be founded.

The two concerns, of course, regularly go together, distinct though they are. Thus, different patterns for connecting congregations have grown up, ranging from the pyramidal global structure of the Roman Catholic Church, with its Italian base, to the legally registered foundation deeds of each small addition to the 20,000 or so Protestant denominations that the statisticians tell us we can find if we look.

Now, it is in relation to these organizational structures, large or small, that the notion of schism should be defined. Schism means unwarrantable and unjustifiable dividing of organized church bodies, by the separating of one group within the structure from the rest of the membership. Schism, as such, is sin, for it is a needless and indefensible breach of visible unity. But withdrawal from a unitary set-up that has become unorthodox and distorts the gospel in a major way and will not put its house in order as for instance when the English church withdrew from the Church of Rome in the sixteenth century, should be called not schism but realignment, doubly so when the withdrawal leads to links with a set-up that is faithful to the truth, as in the sixteenth century the Church of England entered into fellowship with the Lutheran and Reformed churches of Europe, and as now we propose gratefully to accept the offer of full fellowship with the Province of the Southern Cone. Any who call such a move schism should be told that they do not know what schism is.

c. The Anglican Communion

Now, within this frame of reference, how are we to define the Anglican Communion? It is not, and never was, an integrated, pyramidal global organization with the Archbishop of Canterbury as its head. It is simply, as its name proclaims, a Communion - that is, a fellowship of independent provinces sharing ministry and sacraments on the basis of a shared faith, and bound together by a distinctive and very precious heritage - tradition, or style, as you might say - which all appreciate, and wish in some form to conserve. This heritage may be described as follows. (This is familiar ground, so I move over it quickly.)

First, Anglicanism is biblical. Anglicanism says to the world: "Show us anything in Scripture that should be taught and that we are not teaching, and we will teach it. Show us anything we are teaching that is contrary to Scripture, and we will stop teaching it." The Bible, straightforwardly interpreted as revelation from God through human writers, is the Anglican rule of faith.

Second, Anglicanism is creedal, embracing and building on the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, which highlight the Trinity, the incarnation, Christ's saving ministry and the reality of salvation itself. The 39 Articles dot i's and cross t's and fill gaps in the Creeds, clarifying in particular the doctrines of faith, of grace, of justification and of the sacraments.

Third, Anglicanism is liturgical, in continuity with the church of patristic and pre-Reformation days. Through Archbishop Cranmer we inherited a superlative Reformed

Prayer Book, in which the thematic sequence, sin - grace - faith runs through the set services, so that it is a truly evangelical book, and should be appreciated as such.

Fourth, Anglicanism is pastoral, centred upon the making of disciples both domestically and through outreach. Bishops are ordained to give pastoral leadership, caring for both clergy and congregations, and their jurisdiction is to be exercised for the furtherance of pastoral goals.

Fifth, Anglicanism is missional in the sense of being committed to transformation through the gospel - transformation of individuals through teaching and nurture, transformation of congregations through preaching a renewal, transformation of culture through the wisdom and values of the gospel. The transformational purposes of the Reformers and Puritans, the eighteenth-century revival and later revivals, and the latter-day renewal movements, have permanently shaped authentic Anglicanism in a missional way.

Sixth, Anglicanism is not hierarchical nor maintenance-motivated, though it has sometimes appeared to be both; but in fact it is service-oriented. Dioceses exist to resource and help parishes, and provinces exist to coordinate both diocesan and local church ministry; Anglicanism is service-oriented at every level, and it is in loving practical service, shaped by the divine Word and empowered by the divine Spirit, that Anglican unity is finally expressed.

Lambeth Conferences, Primates' meetings, the Anglican Consultative Council, and other national and international gatherings at leadership level, can only be called instruments of unity in a significant sense as they seek to further Anglicanism's service in the gospel to a lost humanity. For the fundamental unity is unity in truth and in mission based on truth; nothing can ever change that.

Such, then, is Anglicanism; and if I may speak personally for a moment, one reason why siren songs urging me to abandon Anglicanism strike no chord in my heart is that I value this heritage so highly, and am so sure that if I walked away from it under any circumstances I should lose far more than I gained. The present project, however, is precisely not to abandon Anglicanism but to realign within it, so as to be able to maintain it in its fullness and authenticity - and that, to me, is a horse of a very different colour. In this I recognize the calling of God.

Anglicans Adrift

For what should we think of global Anglicanism today? It has often been said during the past few years that the Anglican Communion is like a torn net, due to denials by some of things that the rest believe to be integral to the gospel and affirmation, mainly by the same people, of behaviour that the rest believe the gospel absolutely rules out. In certain cases communion with a small "c" - that is, full and free welcome and interchange of clergy and communicants at the Lord's Table - has been suspended. How, we ask, has this come about? In brief, it is the bitter fruit of liberal theology, which has become increasingly dominant in

seminaries and among leaders in what we may call the Anglican Old West - that is, North America in the lead, with Britain and Australasia coming along behind.

This has been the story over the past two generations, since Anglo-Catholic leadership began to flag. Let me explain. Liberal theology as such knows nothing about a God who uses written language to tell us things, or about the reality of sin in the human system, which makes redemption necessary and new birth urgent. Liberal theology posits, rather, a natural religiosity in man (reverence, that is, for a higher power) and a natural capacity for goodwill towards others, and sees Christianity as a force for cherishing and developing these qualities. They are to be fanned into flame and kept burning in the church, which in each generation must articulate itself by concessive dialogue with the cultural pressures, processes and prejudices that surround it. In other words, the church must ever play catch-up to the culture, taking on board whatever is the "in thing" at the moment; otherwise, so it is thought, Christianity will lose all relevance to life. The intrinsic goodness of each "in thing" is taken for granted. In following this agenda the church will inevitably leave the Bible behind at point after point, but since on this view the Bible is the word of fallible men rather than of the infallible God, leaving it behind is no great loss.

Well now; with liberal leaders thinking and teaching in these terms, a collision with conservatives - that is, with upholders of the historic biblical and Anglican faith - was bound to come. It came over gay unions, which liberals wish to bless as a form of holiness, a quasimarrriage.

As part of its current agenda of affirming minority rights (that is the "in thing" these days), western culture has for the past generation accepted gay partnerships as a feature of normal life. Despite the pronouncement of the 1998 Lambeth Conference in favour of the old paths, New Westminster diocese began in 2002 to bless gay couples, and others followed suit.

The Windsor Report called for a moratorium on this, which was not forthcoming. The St. Michael's report said that the issue, though theological, was not against Anglican core doctrine so was not a matter over which to divide the church. On a side wind and by a stopgap motion, the General Synod of 2004 declared gay unions to be marked by "integrity and sanctity". The 2007 General Synod affirmed the St. Michael's position. So here we are now, the Anglican Network in Canada, accepting the invitation to realign in order to uphold historic Anglican standards, not only regarding gay unions but across the board, as those standards were formulated in our church's foundation documents and reformulated in the Montreal Declaration of 1994.

Anglicans Anchored

So, who are we today, and where do we stand at this moment in relation to all that is happening in the storm-tossed Anglican Communion? In light of what I have said so far, I put it to you that there are four things we can and must now say. They are as follows.

To start with, we are a community of conscience, - committed to the Anglican convictions - those defined, I mean, in our foundation documents and expressed in our Prayer Book. The historic Anglican conviction about the authority of the Bible matches that which Luther expressed at the Diet of Worms: "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. To go against conscience is neither right nor safe" - that is, it imperils the soul. As for the historic Anglican conviction about homosexual behaviour, it contains three points:

First, it violates the order of creation. God made the two sexes to mate and procreate, with pleasure and bonding; but homosexual intercourse, apart from being, at least among men, awkward and unhealthy, is barren.

Second, it defies the gospel call to repent of it and abstain from it, as from sin. This call is most clearly perhaps expressed in 1Cor. 6: 9-11, where the power of the Holy Spirit to keep believers clear of this and other lapses is celebrated.

Third, the heart of true pastoral care for homosexual persons is helping them in friendship not to yield to their besetting temptation. We are to love the sinner, though we do not love the sin.

We must hold to these positions, whatever the culture around us may say and do. So a biblically educated conscience requires.

Second, we are a community of church people, committed to the Anglican Communion.

We rejoice to know that the more than 90% of worshipping Anglicans worldwide outside the Old West are solidly loyal to the Christian heritage as Anglicanism has received it, and we see our realignment as among other things, an enhancing of our solidarity with them. As I said earlier, what we are doing is precisely not leaving Anglicanism behind.

Third, we are a community of consecration, committed to the Anglican calling of worship and mission, doxology and discipling. Right from the start church planting will be central to our vision of what we are being called to do.

Fourth, I think we may soberly say of ourselves that we are a community of courage, heading out into unknown waters but committed to the Anglican confidence that God is faithful to those who are faithful to him.

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