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The Incoherence of the Anglican Communion

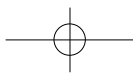
Andrew Atherstone

Three tumultuous weeks in May and June, 2003 will go down in history as a defining moment in the development of the Anglican Communion. Three crises, in three separate countries, stirred up fiery debate about homosexual practice. Yet, more significantly, each has brought to light fundamental and irreconcilable divisions which exist between Anglicans. These distressing controversies have forced us to face the uncomfortable truth that the Anglican Communion, as presently organised, has no theological coherence.

On 20 May, 2003, Downing Street announced that Jeffrey John (a vocal advocate for the blessing of same-sex unions) was to be the new Bishop of Reading, to the consternation of orthodox Anglicans in the Oxford diocese. Next, on 28 May, a gay couple in Vancouver had their relationship blessed using a liturgy authorized by Michael Ingham (Bishop of New Westminster), as mandated by his diocesan synod. This innovation, James Packer warned, undermines the Christian gospel and is 'a watershed decision for world Anglicanism, for it changes the nature of Anglicanism itself'.¹ Then, on 7 June, the Diocese of New Hampshire elected Gene Robinson (who left his wife for a male partner) as its next bishop. His consecration went ahead despite protests from Christians around the world and the Anglican primates' urgent warning that ECUSA's action would 'tear the fabric of our Communion at its deepest level'.²

These events are well documented. They have shaken the Anglican Communion to its core. For months words such as 'schism', 'realignment' and 'disintegration' have been on people's lips. All are agreed that this is a critical juncture in the life of the Communion.

There have always, of course, been theological disagreements and divisions between Anglicans. The first Lambeth Conference of 1867 took place against a background of controversy surrounding *Essays and Reviews* and the heterodox teaching of Bishop Colenso. Yet as Michael Marshall observes, the 'theological gnats' which troubled the Anglican Communion in the 1860s have now 'grown into a stampede of elephants'.³ In recent decades Anglicanism in



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the West has suffered what Packer calls ‘an executive-level landslide into liberalism’. Liberal ways of thinking have gained control of policy, agendas and public discussion, dragging the Communion away from its Anglican heritage—

the churches have been under pressure from within to embrace, among other things, relativism in theology, syncretism in religion, naturalism in liturgy, a unisex or feminist approach to women’s ministry, a positive evaluation of homosexual behaviour, and a socio-political view of the church’s world mission.⁴

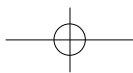
The result is that the Anglican Communion is being torn apart from the inside. In the words of Bill Attwood, we now face ‘a crisis of apostolic order, a crisis of false teaching, and a crisis of courage’.⁵

In his study of the historical development of the Communion, William Sachs charts Anglicanism’s long but futile search for some form of coherent identity. He demonstrates that the last vestiges of unity have been ‘shattered’ in the decades since the Second World War, leading to confusion—

Anglicans have no coherent sense of identity and no apparent means to resolve their uncertainty....A cacophony of voices with equal claim to being normatively Anglican has arisen without a means to mediate among them. Thus the history of modern Anglican life reveals a bewildering profusion of claims to be Anglican.⁶

Anglicanism appears to be like the proverbial ‘wax nose’—it can be shaped to suit one’s personal tastes. Yet Anglicans have a perverse tendency, as Edward Norman notes, to paint their incoherence in positive terms: ‘there is an Anglican rhetoric of self-appraisal in which chaos is described as order, ambiguity as richness of comprehension, patent diversity as a special kind of unity.’⁷

Perhaps this depressing conclusion is too hasty? Perhaps the Anglican Communion can be defended? Perhaps it does have some source of coherence, some bond to hold it together despite sharp internal disagreements? Over the last century that coherence has been sought in a number of different areas—a common culture, a common creed, a common liturgy, a common ministry, a common theological method and a common legislature. We will examine each in turn.

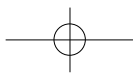


A common culture?

Ecclesia Anglicana—the Church of the English—has existed for centuries. However, Anglicanism is a recent phenomenon, originating in the early 1800s. The phrase ‘Anglican Communion’ can be traced back only to 1851.⁸ Because of its historical origins and etymological roots, being ‘Anglican’ was often identified with being ‘English’. For example, at the 1908 pan-Anglican Congress, Armitage Robinson (Dean of Westminster) declared: ‘The ideal function of the Anglican Communion is to express and guide the spiritual aspirations and activities of the Anglo-Saxon race.’⁹ Similarly Edwin Palmer (Bishop of Bombay in the 1920s) thought that to be Anglican was to be ‘typically English’: ‘Anglicanism is the Christianity of the early undivided Church taken into English hearts, practised by English wills, and stated by English brains.’¹⁰ Lord Plunket (Archbishop of Dublin in the 1880s) asked for the name ‘Anglican’ to be dropped, because Irish Roman Catholics were using it as evidence that the Anglican church was ‘the church of the Anglo-Saxon invaders’.¹¹ It is likewise no coincidence that in the United States and Scotland—nations both keen, historically, to assert their independence from England—members of the Communion are usually known as ‘Episcopalians’ rather than ‘Anglicans’.

Until the Second World War, the Anglican Communion could reasonably be described as ‘the British Empire at prayer’. As recently as 1960, of the 199 diocesan bishops around the world, 126 had been educated in England.¹² Across the entire continent of Africa only four diocesan bishops were black.¹³ Thus William Jacob argues that at this period, ‘the most significant element in the cohesion of the Anglican Communion was the Englishness of its bishops’.¹⁴ Many provinces clung to English expressions of their faith—English worship, English church architecture, English ecclesiastical titles and dress, and theological colleges modelled on Cuddesdon, Mirfield or Westcott House. As Alister McGrath observes, ‘Too often in the past, international Anglicanism has been seen as a safe haven for expatriates in alien cultures, or a gathering point for culturally alienated Anglophiles with a taste for Trollopian characters or Tudor church music.’¹⁵

Much of that, thankfully, has now changed. The Communion has begun to break free from the chains of what John Pobee calls its ‘Anglo-Saxon captivity’.¹⁶ In recent decades Anglicanism has grown significantly in



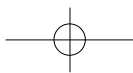
francophone Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific, and we have seen the rise of movements such as ‘Afro-Anglicanism’. More than half the dioceses in the Communion today are outside the British Commonwealth. It is thus no longer tautologous to speak of Anglo-Anglicanism—in other words, that Westemsubsection of the Anglican movement which remains English-speaking.

The centre of gravity of the Communion has been moving steadily from the North and West to the global South. In 1950 there were just twelve Anglican provinces, inhabited largely by the British and their descendants (England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the West Indies, as well as China and Japan). By 1980 there were 27 provinces. Today there are 38. And while orthodox Anglicans in the global South continue to prosper, liberal Anglicans in the West continue to empty churches. There are now more Anglicans in Nigeria than in the whole of Europe and North America put together.¹⁷ As evangelist Michael Green observes: ‘The latter may have more degrees, more finance, more learning, more managerial expertise, but their dioceses are less effective in bringing others to Christ. It is the churches from Asia and Africa that are in the vanguard of Christian advance today.’¹⁸

The average Anglican today is aged between twenty and thirty, poor, lives in the two-thirds world and is evangelical. At last these orthodox Anglicans in the global South are beginning to be heard in the rest of the Communion, not least through the Primates Meeting. Anglican Encounters in the South have also proved influential, making clear reaffirmations of the biblical gospel and its ethical imperatives (such as in the 1997 Kuala Lumpur Statement).

At the turn of the twentieth century it was automatically assumed that the ‘Anglican Communion’ meant simply ‘those churches in communion with the Church of England’. This was soon seen as dissatisfactory. Surely Anglicans worldwide had more in common than just their historic links to England? Therefore the 1930 Lambeth Conference attempted a new definition of the Communion, which remains significant—

The Anglican Communion is a fellowship, within the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, of those duly constituted Dioceses, Provinces or Regional Churches in communion with the See of Canterbury, which have



the following characteristics in common:

(a) They uphold and propagate the Catholic and Apostolic faith and order as they are generally set forth in the Book of Common Prayer as authorized in their several Churches.

(b) They are particular or national Churches, and, as such, promote within each of their territories a national expression of Christian faith, life, and worship.

(c) They are bound together not by a central legislative and executive authority, but by mutual loyalty sustained through common counsel of the Bishops in conference.¹⁹

This definition rightly encourages diverse cultural expressions of Anglicanism and looks instead to other characteristics to provide unity, such as a common faith and a common order, expressed in a common liturgy. To what extent can these factors still be seen today as giving the Anglican Communion its much needed theological coherence?

A common creed?

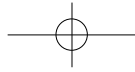
Back in the 1940s Archbishop Garbett of York declared: 'No society whether religious or secular can hold together unless its members are united by some common convictions and aims. A Church with no statement of faith could not exist.'²⁰ The Anglican Communion, however, has no common confession of faith.

The Thirty-Nine Articles once acted as a common confession. At the time of the Elizabethan Settlement they were intended to hold the church together in gospel unity, providing agreement on Christian essentials while allowing wide divergence of opinion on non-essentials (otherwise known as a 'principled comprehensiveness'). However, over the last century the position of the Articles has deliberately been demoted within the Anglican Communion. By the early 1960s Stephen Bayne (first Executive Officer for the Anglican Communion) was happily describing them as 'museum-pieces'.²¹ The 1968 Lambeth Conference recommended that provinces remove the Articles from their Prayer Books and no longer require ordination candidates to subscribe to them. As Ian Ramsey (Bishop of Durham) stated at the time: 'We do not want to sweep the Thirty-Nine Articles under the carpet but to send them to a stately home in England where we can visit them from time to time.'²² As a result, only eleven provinces now officially retain the Articles and most of the rest do not even refer to them in their constitutions.²³

If the Thirty-Nine Articles no longer provide a common confession for the Anglican Communion, perhaps the historic creeds do? Unfortunately this is wishful thinking. Many Anglican clergy in the West, bishops amongst them, now explicitly reject central tenets of orthodox Christianity. In the 1960s we had radical liberals such as James Pike (Bishop of California) arguing that the Trinity should be abandoned as ‘excess baggage’ and John Robinson (Bishop of Woolwich) with his notorious *Honest to God*. The 1980s and 90s brought David Jenkins (Bishop of Durham) with his denials of the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection of Christ and Jack Spong (Bishop of Newark) with his ‘Twelve Theses’ rejecting the Christian faith wholesale. These are just the tip of the iceberg. A recent survey conducted by *Christian Research* shows that many English clergy today are far from credally orthodox.²⁴ The numbers of those who believe the creed ‘without question’ (implying confidence to teach the faith) are disturbingly low.

Statement	Male clergy %	Female clergy %
I believe in God the Father who created the world	83	74
I believe that Jesus Christ was born of a Virgin	58	33
I believe that Jesus Christ died to take away the sins of the world	76	65
I believe that Jesus Christ physically rose from the dead	68	53
I believe that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way by which we can be saved	53	39

It would appear, then, that there are no longer any fundamental doctrines within the Anglican Communion—all is now *adiaphora*. As Hensley Henson proclaimed in the 1930s, the Church of England ‘exhibits a doctrinal incoherence which has no parallel in any other church claiming to be traditionally orthodox’.²⁵ The historic creeds are still recited, but by many within Anglo-Anglicanism they are not believed. William Oddie observes—



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Having been emptied of conviction and meaning, they have been retained as decorative features so that if accusations are made of loss of theological identity they may be indicated as standing intact. In just the same way the great cannons which swayed the battles of former years, emptied of their thunder, stand in museums and on the battlements of ruined fortifications.²⁶

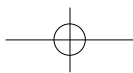
When this lack of doctrinal coherence is pointed out, it is often replied that the Anglican Communion is 'comprehensive'—that is celebrates 'diversity in unity'. This was one of the repeated refrains of Archbishop Carey, and Archbishop Runcie before him.²⁷ The bishops at Lambeth 1968, whilst sidelining the Articles, attempted a definition of 'comprehensiveness'.

Comprehensiveness demands agreement on fundamentals, while tolerating disagreement on matters in which Christians may differ without feeling the necessity of breaking communion. In the mind of an Anglican, comprehensiveness is not compromise. Nor is it to bargain one truth for another. It is not a sophisticated word for syncretism....It has been the tradition of Anglicanism to contain within one body both Protestant and Catholic elements. But there is a continuing search for the whole truth in which these elements will find complete reconciliation.²⁸

Although this statement begins well, it degenerates into a Mauricean view of truth as the reconciling of two opposites. As Stephen Sykes explains in his classic critique of the bishops' definition, this approach—

has served as an open invitation to intellectual laziness and self-deception...the failure to be frank about the issues between the parties in the Church of England has led to an ultimately illusory self-projection as a Church without any specific doctrinal or confessional position....Lots of contradictory things may be said to be complementary by those with a vested interest in refusing to think straight.²⁹

Sykes goes on to reject this notion of comprehensiveness as 'utterly inadequate...a dangerous form of ecclesiastical self-deception...a bogus theory...which for far too long has lain like a fog over the Anglican mind'.³⁰



‘Principled comprehensiveness’, based on an agreement on fundamentals, has been forgotten. Instead we have what Packer colourfully calls ‘theological glossolalia which Eeyore would have labelled a Confused Noise’.³¹ As long ago as the 1950s Alec Vidler warned that comprehensiveness had evolved into ‘an unprincipled syncretism’ which was transforming the Anglican Communion into ‘a sort of league of religions’.³² The situation has only continued to deteriorate in recent years, such that Anglicans may now believe anything or nothing. Francis Moss laments—

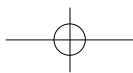
These are the days of Situation Theology, Situation Ethics and theological subjectivity....all is negotiable, all is dispensable, nothing is actually definitive or binding at least in the sense of being enforceable. All is fluid in the interests of current policy, ecumenical goals, and the commitment—above all—to comprehensiveness. It is unthinkable that officially anyone should be charged with heresy in the contemporary Church of England when it is a tenet of an accepted school of thought that there are no fixed criteria for the determination of theological truth and error.³³

As Robert Hannaford notes, the inclusion of radical liberalism within the Anglican Communion ‘tests the idea of comprehensiveness to destruction’.³⁴

This theological pluralism has become a scandal to many and forced some out of the Communion. For example, Dwight Longenecker (once an Anglican clergyman and now a Roman Catholic) reflects—

I had mistaken a confederation of contradictions for unity. The Anglican church with her various parties, clubs, confraternities, associations and societies is more like a Council of Churches than a Church....Although I was attracted to Anglican comprehensiveness, the lack of any objective theology which was part of the bargain made my private prayer and public ministry seem like a daily attempt to dance on quicksand.³⁵

Likewise Richard Rutt (once Bishop of Leicester) describes the Anglican Communion as ‘a house built on the sand of shifting doctrines’.³⁶ In the absence of a common creed, our search for theological coherence within the Communion must continue elsewhere.



A common liturgy?

Trying to defend the consecration of Gene Robinson, Frank Griswold (Presiding Bishop in ECUSA) has recently declared: 'one of our Anglican gifts is to contain different theological perspectives within a context of common prayer.'³⁷ Likewise David Edwards optimistically proclaims that ECUSA tends 'to risk internal divisions by its willingness to espouse the causes of minorities. Yet it is given a deep identity and a solid strength by its flourishing tradition of liturgical worship'.³⁸

This argument is often heard—that the Anglican Communion gets its theological coherence not from a common creed but from a common liturgy. Many other examples of such a claim could be given. E. A. de Mendieta states that the Communion is bound together by its 'public and common worship, rather than...explicit and clearly defined dogma'.³⁹ Bishop Jenkins says that Anglicans get their unity from 'Liturgical experience in and through common prayer with a refusal to be dominated by any one theological agenda'.⁴⁰ The result is that liturgical correctness has been raised to a primary issue in some parts of the Communion, typified by bishops who do not mind what their clergy preach from the pulpit as long as they wear a surplice at the Lord's Supper.

Of course public liturgy is important and our doctrine can be inferred from it, on the principle *lex orandi, lex credendi*. The bishops at the 1897 Lambeth Conference declared that 'The Book of Common Prayer, next to the Bible itself, is the authoritative standard of the doctrine of the Anglican Communion'.⁴¹ It was translated into more than 150 languages around the globe and towards the end of the twentieth century Roger Lloyd was still able to claim: 'The common property of all Churches of the Anglican Communion is the Book of Common Prayer; and that more than anything else binds them together. It is therefore in the Prayer Book that we find the heart of Anglicanism laid bare....'⁴² However, as Gareth Bennett wrote in his prophetic *Crockford's* preface, that common liturgical heritage 'is fading as fast as the Cheshire Cat's smile'.⁴³

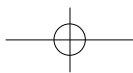
Ever since 1662 there have been revisions of the Prayer Book. The 1920s, for example, saw a burst of activity, with revisions in Scotland, Canada, Ireland, the United States and England (famously rejected by Parliament). Yet this pales in comparison to the multitude of radical alternative liturgies which have appeared

around the Anglican Communion since the 1960s. The 1958 Lambeth Conference, strongly influenced by the Liturgical Movement which was sweeping through the denominations, encouraged provinces to tackle revision and this became a major theme at the 1963 Anglican Congress in Toronto.

The result has been that the Prayer Book is now generally abandoned around the Anglican Communion and we have a plethora of new liturgies instead. Of concern is not the demise of Prayer Book English, but of Prayer Book doctrine. Some new liturgies are excellent, providing biblical prayers for a new generation; but others encase serious doctrinal error, bearing scant resemblance to classical Anglican teaching. In England, Archbishop Habgood of York acknowledged that the Alternative Service Book represented a ‘major shift in doctrinal emphasis’ away from the Book of Common Prayer.⁴⁴ This trend has continued with the advent of *Common Worship*, which David Phillips has shown to reveal ‘a general drift away from the Reformation’.⁴⁵ Likewise, ECUSA’s 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* has been described by Paul Zahl as ‘a Trojan Horse’ which carries ‘the stealthy germs of anti-Reformation emphasis’.⁴⁶ Its introduction signalled the final end of Protestant churchmanship in ECUSA—once known, of course, as PECUSA. Similar criticisms have been made of the authorized liturgies in New Zealand, Canada and elsewhere. These new Anglican liturgies are said to bear the same ‘family likeness’, but actually they display radically divergent theological perspectives. The situation is considerably worse when we consider some of the unauthorized liturgies in use around the Anglican Communion—radical feminist liturgies, multi-faith liturgies, liturgies based on Matthew Fox’s creation mysticism and other pseudo-Christian spiritualities, liturgies to bless same-sex unions and so forth. Far from being the source of Anglican coherence, they are a symptom of increasing Anglican incoherence.

A common ministry?

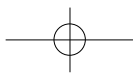
It has long been taken for granted that one of the characteristics of a ‘communion’ is mutual recognition and interchangeability of ministries—in other words, those ordained in one part of the communion will be considered validly ordained by another part, and *vice versa*. Historically this has been a major sticking point in ecumenical discussions. For example, the Roman Church does not consider Anglican orders to be valid and many Anglicans do not consider Methodist orders to be valid, which is one reason that these churches are kept apart.



However, with the advent of the ordination of women, the Anglican Communion itself no longer possesses an internally coherent ministry. Women ordained in some provinces are not recognised in others. The 1978 Lambeth Conference was greeted with the *fait accompli* of women already ordained in Hong Kong, Canada, the United States and New Zealand, and could do no more than offer a weak resolution encouraging provinces to stay in communion with each other despite these developments.⁴⁷ By the 1998 Lambeth Conference some women had been consecrated as bishops. Their presence at the Conference highlighted the incoherence of Anglican orders, since their episcopal ministry is not recognised by the majority of provinces. This is particularly problematic since the Chicago–Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1886–88 insists that there can be no ecclesial unity without agreement on the nature of episcopal ministry. As Hannaford observes: ‘Anglicans now find themselves discussing their own internal relations in terms that seem more appropriate to ecumenical dialogue between separate churches.’⁴⁸

The first Eames Commission was established after the 1988 Lambeth Conference as a damage limitation exercise, to look for ways to keep Anglicans together despite these tensions over ordination. The Commission’s Report makes no attempt to argue that ordination is an *adiaphoron* (which would at least have been a theologically cogent position) and yet insists that provinces should accept one another’s differing practice. The effect is to promote ‘communion at any price’. As Tim Bradshaw warns, the Eames principle ‘appears to be that no doctrinal, ethical or ecclesial disagreements should provoke excommunication or disruption’.⁴⁹

In his opening sermon to the 1988 Lambeth Conference, Archbishop Runcie exclaimed: ‘I thank God for what we form as a Communion: not an Empire, nor a Federation, nor a jurisdiction, nor yet the whole Church, but a Communion—a fellowship based on our gathering at the Lord’s Table, where we share “the means of grace and the hope of glory”.’⁵⁰ The fact is, however, that many Anglicans around the world, even within the same province, refuse to share the Lord’s Supper together because of their disagreements over the ordination and consecration of women. At the same Lambeth Conference, Runcie was forced to admit that ‘although our Communion has not been broken, it has been impaired’.⁵¹ Yet the notion of ‘impaired communion’ is at best a suspect theological concept. John Austin Baker (former Bishop of



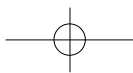
Salisbury) thinks it would be more accurate to speak of 'no communion at all'. He argues that friendly co-operation is different to accepting the ministries of others: 'Theologically this is the crux. Where ministries are not recognized, full sacramental fellowship cannot exist; and where full sacramental fellowship is not present, you cannot have one church. That is the acid test.'⁵²

Baker's logic is that for the Anglican Communion to regain its coherence, those who reject the ordination of women must now be forcibly excluded—a process which has already begun in the United States and Canada. What was once a subject for discussion is thus made an article of faith, though this imperialistic policy will be resisted in provinces where aggressive ultra-liberalism does not have a stranglehold. It is possible that the Anglican Communion never re-establishes a coherent approach to ordained ministry.

A common theological method?

Some argue that the Anglican Communion gains its coherence not from any particular doctrinal or liturgical commitment, but from its common approach to doing theology. For example, the 1997 Virginia Report declares, 'Anglicans are held together by the characteristic way in which they use Scripture, tradition and reason in discerning afresh the mind of Christ for the Church in each generation.'⁵³ Likewise, in his classic study of the seventeenth century Anglican divines, Henry McAdoo argues that 'the distinctiveness of Anglicanism proceeds not from a systematic theology but from the spirit in which theological questions are handled'.⁵⁴ Perhaps Anglicans can look to the famous 'three-legged stool' for their much needed unity?

Far from it! There is no agreed theological method across the Anglican Communion. As the authors of *To Mend the Net* observe, widely diverse and contradictory approaches amongst Anglicans to Scripture, tradition and reason contribute 'to the foundation of a tower once called Babel', becoming 'a barrier rather than a bridge to unity and truth'.⁵⁵ The classic Christian approach to doing theology has been widely abandoned in recent decades. Beginning with a new breed of scholars in the 1960s and 70s (such as Dennis Nineham, Maurice Wiles and David Jenkins), Western academic theology has come to reject the teaching of the Bible and the early church as of any relevance to modern doctrine or church practice. Their views have crept from the academy into our theological colleges and, as a result, Anglo-Anglicanism has trained a



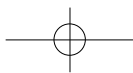
whole generation of clergy who, in the words of Gareth Bennett, are in danger of thinking ‘that theology is the latest fashionable theory of theologians’.⁵⁶ Bennett continues, sarcastically: ‘It would seem that modern man must live amid the ruins of past doctrinal and ecclesiastical systems, looking to the Scriptures only for themes and apprehensions which may inform his individual exploration of the mystery of God.’⁵⁷

Other observers of the Anglican Communion have arrived at the same conclusion. Peter Coleman, for example, wonders whether Scripture, tradition and reason have become ‘a methodological strait-jacket for a Church which no longer actually lives inside it’.⁵⁸ Similarly Packer and McGrath point out that a new theological method has become dominant within Anglo-Anglicanism, which—

recategorizes Scripture as an intellectually, morally, and culturally flawed human witness to God...Built on the axiom that everyone should rely on his or her personal judgment as to how much of biblical teaching one should take seriously and how far any of it should be held to express God’s own thoughts, this modern method guarantees a plurality of beliefs and purposes in the church, and makes it impossible to prove any theological affirmation either right or wrong. But when everything is thus disputable, theology becomes a confused noise, Christians are at cross purposes with one another, there is no united witness to the gospel of salvation from sin, and the church grinds to a halt.⁵⁹

Theological method is closely connected to questions of authority, which have become a hot topic in recent years. They take us to the root cause of Anglicanism’s divisions. By what authority do Anglicans believe and teach what they believe and teach? At the 1948 Lambeth Conference, one group of bishops considered the question, ‘Is Anglicanism based on a sufficiently coherent form of authority to form the nucleus of a world-wide fellowship of Churches, or does its comprehensiveness conceal internal divisions which may cause its disruption?’ They rejected any legal basis for unity within the Communion and offered instead the concept of ‘dispersed authority’—

Authority, as inherited by the Anglican Communion from the undivided Church of the early centuries of the Christian era, is single in that it is



derived from a single Divine source, and reflects within itself the richness and historicity of the divine Revelation....It is distributed among Scripture, Tradition, Creeds, the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, the witness of saints, and the consensus fidelium....It is thus a dispersed rather than a centralized authority having many elements which combine, interact with, and check each other....⁶⁰

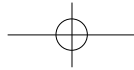
Although never brought to the full conference and not considered particularly significant at the time, this declaration has since been hailed as a milestone of Anglican identity. Championed especially by Stephen Sykes, it has gained an importance never envisioned in 1948.⁶¹ It is often quoted by those who reject the idea that authority for Christians is concentrated either in one infallible teacher (the Pope) or in one infallible book (the Bible). Robert Runcie was delighted with the concept of dispersed sources of authority, explaining to the 1988 Lambeth Conference that it 'encourages the thriving of variety',⁶² for which read 'theological incoherence'.

As Edward Norman notes, the doctrine of 'dispersed authority' leads to 'a spiritual free-for-all' and 'permanent indecision...reducing Christianity to generalities'.⁶³ He blames this theory for the current problems in the Anglican Communion—

a crisis of identity, a crisis of unity, and an inability to adduce a coherent ecclesiology. It is hard to imagine that divine providence, disclosed in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can have entrusted the presence of Christ in the World to such an ideological shambles.⁶⁴

A common legislature?

Faced with an increasing lack of doctrinal, liturgical or methodological coherence, the Anglican Communion has reached its last resort, which is to seek unity in common structures and a common legislature. Recent decades have seen the burgeoning of a central bureaucracy. Speaking of the Church of England, Melvin Tinker warns of 'the undermining of gospel ministry presently being caused by the gradual slide of the denomination into a dead centralisation of power upheld by bogus theology'.⁶⁵ The same process is taking place across the Anglican Communion as a whole.



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The policy of centralism began soon after the Second World War, with ventures such as the Advisory Council on Missionary Strategy and a central Anglican College at Canterbury. Then large Anglican Congresses were held at Minneapolis (1954) and Toronto (1963). After Lambeth 1958 the post of Executive Officer of the Anglican Communion was invented. After Lambeth 1968 the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) was created. After Lambeth 1978 the Primates Meeting was formed. Meanwhile the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lambeth Conference have been elevated to a position of influence never envisaged a century ago.

We now have what are popularly known as the four ‘instruments of unity’—the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the ACC and the Primates Meeting. Since Anglicans hold nothing else in common, membership of the Communion is usually judged merely by whether one is in communion with Canterbury and represented on these committees. This is a far cry from the biblical understanding of true Christian unity as being unity in the apostolic gospel. Samuel Edwards, for one, is depressed by this state of affairs—

it would seem that the basis of communion for Anglicans in effect has been reduced to the invitation list for the Lambeth Conference. Indeed, one might be forgiven for asking whether the term ‘Anglican Communion’ is still meaningful, when the fundamental conditions for sacramental communion between churches—namely, common faith and a mutually recognized ministry—no longer exist within it. The Anglican Communion may well have become an Association of the Descendants of the English Reformation, having the same basic standard for membership as a genealogical society in which legitimate descent from the ancestral group rather than fidelity to its principles is the determinative qualification.⁶⁶

Until now, the four ‘instruments of unity’ have held moral but not juridical authority within the Communion. The Archbishop of Canterbury can advise and warn, but not discipline or interfere in other provinces. The Lambeth Conference can recommend but not command. However, faced with the prospect of the Anglican Communion’s imminent disintegration, the Virginia Report recommends that greater power be given to the central bureaucracy, which will make decisions on doctrine and ethics binding upon the whole Communion. This would radically change the nature of the Communion.

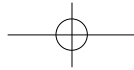
At present the Anglican Communion is a collection of autonomous national churches, similar to the autocephalous Eastern Orthodox churches. Yet the Virginia Report would make the Communion into one giant worldwide church, like the Church of Rome. The Archbishop of Canterbury would turn from *primus inter pares* into an Anglican Pope. The Lambeth Conference would turn from an informal gathering into a Council. The Primates Meeting would turn into an Anglican curia.⁶⁷ Although orthodox Anglicans may sometimes occupy such positions of influence, it would ultimately fail to heal the Communion's divisions at any more than a superficial level. As Bradshaw observes in his critique of the Virginia Report, this 'Western bureaucratic restructuring' would merely lead to 'a world-wide communion with greatly increased structures of power, but greatly reduced doctrinal and ethical content'. A central legislature would give influence to all manner of academic 'experts', while leaving pastors and evangelists out in the cold.⁶⁸ It might be able to enforce a universal version of lowest-common-denominator Anglicanism, but at the expense of vibrant biblical Christianity.

Two Anglican Communions?

As has been shown in this study, the Anglican Communion as presently organised lacks any form of theological coherence. Zahl describes the Communion as 'a jostling, jammed, glass telephone booth filled with strangers, constrained by geography to remain in some relation'.⁶⁹ Yet the strain cannot be endured—these strangers must eventually separate.

David Holloway correctly observes that the Anglican Communion has succumbed to 'doublethink', that Orwellian nightmare which involves 'holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them'.⁷⁰ George Eves goes further, describing the current situation as 'two religions in one church'. He rejects the radical liberalism now rampant within Anglo-Anglicanism as another gospel—

It is in fact another religion and actually stands opposed to classical Christianity on almost every important theological issue. Our crisis exists largely...because these two incompatible and opposed religions, each with its own vision and purpose, co-exist in our church. This is our fundamental problem. It has led to a terrible kind of institutional paralysis. No organization can long continue in such a state of division.⁷¹



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Eves' conclusion is stark: 'liberalism is not just another option within the spectrum of Christian truth....It is a deadly enemy of Christ and his Church.'⁷² Orthodox Anglicans and heterodox Anglicans cannot coexist with any integrity.

Unless action is taken, it is by no means inevitable that the Anglican Communion will survive. If we disregard the essentials of the Christian gospel, the Communion will eventually be extinguished. Packer says—

Surely the Anglican communion cannot long continue like this: the centre, it seems, cannot hold, and if things go on as they are going Anglicanism must find itself flying apart....The Anglican family is in a state of internal schism, and there can be no recovery of biblical unity among us further than there is a recovery of the biblical truths that are unity's basic bond.⁷³

The Anglican Communion must rediscover and reaffirm the fundamentals of the Christian faith. We need a return to 'principled comprehensiveness', allowing divergence on non-essentials but firm agreement on gospel essentials. Some have already begun this work, as shown by the 1991 Baltimore Declaration and the 1994 Montreal Declaration of Anglican Essentials.⁷⁴ More need to take up the challenge.

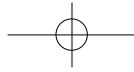
A reaffirmation of Christian fundamentals will inevitably highlight the deep and irreconcilable divisions between orthodox Anglicans and heterodox Anglicans. Separation is unavoidable. Instead of the theological chaos of 'two religions in one church', let us face facts and have two churches. Instead of 'parallel jurisdictions' in one Communion (which legitimize heterodoxy and marginalize orthodoxy) let us have two 'parallel Communions', visibly and spiritually separate. This is not to break *koinonia* (which would be schism) but merely to recognize that *koinonia* does not exist between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Let the heterodox go their revisionist way alone—they have cut themselves adrift from historic Anglicanism and will soon dwindle into a British and North American sect. Those previously forced out of the Anglican fold because of their biblical faith (such as the Reformed Episcopalians, the Free Church of England, the Church of England in South Africa and various other 'continuing' bodies) could then be warmly welcomed back into the orthodox Anglican Communion. The Anglican Mission in America and the Anglican Communion in New

Westminster would stand clearly within this Communion, as would the millions of orthodox Anglicans in the global South. This would be a visible demonstration of true Christian unity. If the Anglican Communion is to be sustained it must urgently regain its theological coherence, which is to be found in unity around the authentic apostolic gospel alone.

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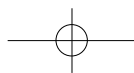
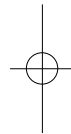
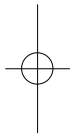
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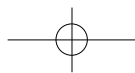
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