

The Next Twenty Years for Anglican Christians

'Crisis', 'schism', 'division', 'break-up' – this has been the language of the last five years in the Anglican Communion. Again and again we have reached 'defining moments', 'crucial meetings' and 'turning points', only to discover that they simply lead into another period of uncertainty.

Uncertainty is now over. The decisive moments have passed. Irreversible actions have occurred. The time has come for sustained thought about a different future. The Anglican Communion will never be the same again. The Windsor process has failed, largely because it refused to grapple with the key issue of the truth. A new and more biblical vision is required to help biblically faithful Anglican churches survive and grow in the contemporary world.

Some have still set their hopes on the Lambeth Conference. But that is to misunderstand the significance of our time. It can no longer either unify Anglicanism or speak with authority. The invitations have gone to virtually all, and it is likely that some of those not invited will still attend as guests. There are faithful Anglican bishops who are not invited, and there are others who cannot be present in good conscience. The solemn words of the 1998 Conference were ignored by the American Church in 2003, and any authority which we may have ascribed to the deliberations of the Bishops has been lost permanently. Not surprisingly, Lambeth 2008 is not going to attempt a similar exercise in conciliar pronouncements. Why would it? There is no vision here.

The key defining moment on the liberal side was the consecration of Bishop Robinson of New Hampshire. At first it was hoped that this was a mere aberration, that it could be dealt with by returning to where we were. In fact it was a permanent action with permanent consequences. It truly expressed the heart-felt views of the greater part of the leadership of the American Episcopal Church. The only way in which steps can be retraced is by repudiating the action itself, a development impossible to contemplate. That was the year of decision for the American church, and the decision was made in the clear light of day. They knew what they were doing.

The American House of Bishops has now responded to the Primates. Many have seen in their pronouncements sufficient conformity to the request of the Primates to enable the Communion to continue on its way. I do not read their statement like that. I think that they have failed to meet the hopes of the Primates. But the significance of the document at this level hardly matters. The document taken as a whole makes the real issue abundantly clear. Sexual rights are gospel.

The Americans are firmly committed to the view that the practice of homosexual sex in a long term relationship is morally acceptable. Not only is it acceptable, it is demanded by the gospel itself that we endorse this lifestyle as Christian. They are prepared to wait for a short time while the rest of the Communion catches up. But they do not intend to reverse their decisions about this and they do intend to proclaim this message wherever possible. They want to persuade us

that they are right, and that the rest of us should embrace this development. Here is a missionary faith.

The biblical conservatives and their allies in Africa and Asia knew this. They did not need to wait for the House of Bishops. They took irreversible steps to secure the future of some of the biblical Anglicans in North America. I say 'some', because it is often forgotten that faithful Canadian Anglicans are living in a Diocese where the blessing of same sex unions is diocesan policy. What if TEC has been judged to conform to the Primates wishes? The Diocese of New Westminster certainly has not. What is to be done for the orthodox in that Diocese? What will happen if British Anglicans follow this route? This sort of question shows why a new vision and further action will be needed.

The response of the Primates has involved the provision of episcopal oversight. This, too, has changed the nature of the Anglican Communion. From now on there will inevitably be boundary crossing and the days of sacrosanct diocesan boundaries are over. Anglican episcopacy now includes overlapping jurisdictions and personal rather than merely geographical oversight. If the sexual revolution becomes more broadly accepted elsewhere, so other Bishops will be appointed as they have been in the USA. This is the new fact of Anglican polity. How are these developments going to be incorporated into world-Anglicanism? What future should we be thinking of? Where is our vision for them? Hand-wringing is not the answer.

The aim of the Archbishop of Canterbury was to retain the highest level of fellowship in the Communion. He believed that truth will be found in communion, in inclusion rather than exclusion. From his point of view, an extended passage of time is vital. What matters for the Archbishop is not this Lambeth, but the next one and the one after that. Will those who have initiated this novelty relent and give up their commitments? Or will the objectors tire of their fuss and concede the point? Since the likelihood of the American church repenting of its action is remote, the hope must be that those who now protest will eventually weary of their protest and learn to live with the novelty of active gay bishops.

The Archbishop has revealed his hopes through a lecture on biblical interpretation, 'The Bible Today: Reading and Hearing', delivered in Canada in April 2007. In this lecture he addresses the very heart of the controversy, by challenging conservative interpretations of Romans 1 and John 14, and thus raising the issues of interpretation, human sexuality and the uniqueness of Christ as Mediator. He has signalled the importance of hermeneutics for our future. His lecture shows that there is an unavoidable contest about the meaning of the Bible in these crucial areas ahead of us. It is a challenge which must be met at a theological level. We may think that this whole business is about politics and border-crossing and ultimatums and conferences, but in fact it is about theology and especially the authority and interpretation of Scripture.

That leads to this fundamental conclusion. Those who believe that the American development is wrong must also plan for the next decades, not the next few months. There is every reason to think that the Western view of sexuality will eventually permeate other parts of the world. After all, it has done so spectacularly in the West, and the modern communication revolution has opened the way for everyone to be aware of what happens in New York, London, San Francisco and Brighton.

Thus the question before the biblically orthodox in the Communion is this: what new vision of the Anglican Communion should we embrace? Where should it be in the next twenty years? How can we ensure that the word of God rules our lives? How are we going to guard ourselves effectively against the sexual agenda of the West and begin to turn back the tide of Western liberalism? What theological education must we have? How can we now best network with each other? Who is going to care for Episcopalians in other western provinces who are going to be objecting to the official acceptance of non-biblical practices? The need for high level discussion of these issues is urgent.

As an initial step I look to the Global South leadership to call for another 'Blast of the Trumpet.' The ensuing consultation must start with the reality of where we are now, and look steadfastly to a future in which the bonds of Communion have been permanently loosened. It has to strengthen the fellowship by which churches will help each other to guard their theological good health while engaging together with the task of preaching the gospel to an unbelieving world.

In any case, the basic issue is no longer how can the communion be kept together. It is, within the Communion as it has now become, how can biblical Anglicans help each other survive and mission effectively in the contemporary world? The Africans have shown a commendable concern for this very issue and taken steps to assist the western church. They have recognised that the gospel sometimes divides and sometimes requires new and startling initiatives. We must now all take the actions and do the thinking required to safeguard biblical truth, not merely in the West but throughout the Anglican world. To fail here, will be to waste the time and effort which has brought us to this fateful hour.

ENDS

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