

BEING FAITHFUL: The Shape of Historic Anglicanism Today
The Theological Resource Group of GAFCON

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In June 2008, The Global Anglican Futures Conference (GAFCON) was hailed as one of the most significant developments in worldwide Anglicanism for many years. It was seen as constituting a clear signal from so-called ‘traditionalist’ Anglicans that they wished to distance themselves from both the tenets of theological liberalism and its practical outworking in church life.

On 29th June 2008, the participants in GAFCON issued a Statement on the Global Anglican Future, which described GAFCON as ‘a spiritual movement to preserve and promote the truth and power of the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ as we Anglicans have received it’ and as ‘a movement in the Spirit’. The Statement launched ‘the GAFCON movement as a ‘fellowship of confessing Anglicans’, The Jerusalem Declaration serving as ‘the basis of the fellowship’. The Declaration was described in the Statement as ‘a contemporary rule...to guide the movement for the future’ and was set out in full within the body of the Statement.

In September 2009, a Commentary on the Declaration was published under the title *Being Faithful: The Shape of Historic Anglicanism Today*. The Commentary was prepared by the Theological Resource Group of GAFCON and in its published form, it is supplemented by a document entitled *The Way, The Truth and The Life*, which consists of a number of papers written by members of the GAFCON Theological Resource Group and describes itself as a ‘handbook, to serve as a theological introduction and definition for GAFCON’.

To understand the GAFCON movement and its theological reference points and to gain some insight into the nature of the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans, it is necessary to read the Statement, the Declaration, the Commentary and *The Way, The Truth and The Life* as a whole, which was no doubt the intention behind their publication together under the banner *Being Faithful: The Shape of Historic Anglicanism Today*.

In his Foreword to this compilation, The Most Revd Peter Jensen, Archbishop of Sydney and Secretary of the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans, remarks

that ‘as the GAFCON Statement and the Declaration are increasingly referred to as a canon of contemporary faithfulness to the Scriptures, the Commentary will become a key resource for churches’.

The Commentary does reveal a great deal about the theological basis of the GAFCON movement and the currents of thinking at work within it. However, the Commentary does not shed light on all aspects of the Declaration and where comment is expressed on particular clauses of the Declaration, there are a number of respects in which ‘faithfulness to the Scriptures’ appears not to be the decisive, shaping influence.

The documents comprising *Being Faithful* are notable, in particular, for their treatment of the means of salvation, the atonement, the nature of orthodox Anglicanism, and Roman Catholicism.

When addressing the means of salvation, the Declaration (Clause 1) refers to salvation ‘by grace through faith’ (the phraseology, incidentally, of the 1994 ‘Evangelical and Catholics Together’ Statement). It does not affirm justification by grace alone, through faith alone. In the Commentary, (p. 28) Article XI of the Thirty-nine Articles is rightly alluded to but the Commentary omits the crucial word ‘only’ (which is, of course, present in Article XI). Article XI states that ‘we are justified by Faith only’ and that this ‘is a most wholesome Doctrine, and very full of comfort’. Justification by faith alone is a fundamental and distinguishing doctrine of authentic Anglicanism. George Whitefield described it as ‘the doctrine of the Scripture and of the Church of England’. However, it is not explicitly affirmed in the Declaration or its Commentary.

Related to this, neither Clause 1 of the Declaration, nor the Commentary, affirm the doctrine of imputed righteousness and the phraseology actually adopted in both places is ambiguous, blurring the distinction between justification and sanctification. In particular, the ‘fruits of love’ and ‘ongoing repentance’ referred to in Clause 1 are not clearly identified as the products alone of new, regenerate life in Christ. As presently drafted, Clause 1 could be assented to by those who wrongly see sanctification as a process evidencing the believer’s ongoing justification before God and who therefore deny the biblical doctrine of justification (which refers exclusively to God’s objective, forensic judgment concerning a sinner’s standing before him). The reference to the ‘fruits of love’ is

all too reminiscent of the phraseology used by John Henry Newman in *Tract 90* (e.g. ‘faith working by love is the seed of divine graces’ and ‘Divine influences... are the first fruits of the grace of justification’).

With regard to the atonement, the Commentary, (p. 44) states that ‘In his body Jesus bore our sins, his atoning death on the cross won for us our salvation by restoring our fellowship with God’. While this is correct, it fails to affirm the penal, substitutionary nature of Christ’s death.

The Commentary and accompanying papers refer extensively to ‘Anglican identity’, ‘orthodox faith and practice’, ‘tradition and churchmanship’, ‘legitimate diversity’, ‘authentic Anglicanism’, ‘Anglican orthodoxy’ and ‘the Anglican via media’. However, there is no identification of what is, in the final analysis, the necessary core of Anglican belief. The Introduction to the Statement indicates with reference to public confession of the Apostolic faith that it is ‘not a test of orthodoxy for all Anglicans’, and that ‘we are most emphatically not suggesting that those who do not subscribe to the same confession are thereby any less faithful Anglicans.’ If this is a reference to the ‘public confession of the Apostolic faith’ then there is a fundamental problem. Since there is a clear doctrinal core to what it means to be a faithful Anglican, those who do not accept that core are not faithful Anglicans.

Section 1.2.2 of *The Way, The Truth and The Life*, refers to relationships with other churches (*Being Faithful*, p. 101). Reference is rightly made to the fact that the Thirty-nine Articles are normative, but later in the same section it is asserted that ‘Anglican Orthodoxy’ ‘is eager to participate in ecumenical dialogue and partnerships, with Roman Catholics...and the Orthodox’. While there might be no objection to certain forms of dialogue with Roman Catholics and the Orthodox, it is impossible to think that biblically faithful Anglicans can enter into ecumenical dialogue or partnerships with Roman Catholics or the Orthodox Churches. For example, historic Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism have fundamentally conflicting doctrinal positions on essential matters to do with the nature of authority and the means of salvation and the Roman Catholic Church has anathematised truths which protestant evangelical Anglicans affirm to be essential.

In the discussion of ‘Anglican orthodoxy’ in the Commentary (pp. 101-102), the 1994 ‘Evangelicals and Catholics Together’ Statement is cited, making the

point that ‘the deepest...division is between theological conservatives...who honour the Christ of the Bible and the historic creeds and confessions, and theological liberals and radicals who...do not’, and that this division splits the older Protestant bodies and the Roman Catholic communion equally, from the inside’. To the extent that this is relied upon to assert that all ‘theological conservatives’ can and should stand together, against ‘theological liberals and radicals’, then that is something to be challenged. There are equally deep and legitimate doctrinal divisions between protestant evangelical Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism and these should not be under-estimated or overlooked for the sake of the battle against theological liberalism.

The Commentary states that Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics may differ on ‘various matters’ and yet ‘uphold orthodox faith and practice’ (p. 60). However, the Commentary does not explain what is intended by the phrase ‘various matters’. It is plain that salvation by grace alone, through faith alone is at the heart of ‘orthodox faith’ with the consequence that protestant evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics cannot differ, as they do, on the nature and means of salvation and still be said to ‘uphold orthodox faith’ together. A similar point arises (Commentary, p. 63) which recognises the existence of disagreement ‘over some important issues’ among those who are ‘united in making the Jerusalem Declaration’. Again, where there is clear and obvious disagreement about the nature and means of salvation, it cannot be asserted that those making the Declaration are in truth ‘united’. Page 63 also recognises ‘the possibility of coming together’ but surely there must first be a rigorous examination of whether or not there really is a clear basis for unity founded upon the evangelical truths of the biblical gospel. Where such agreement does not exist, then any professed ‘unity’ is in reality false.

Readers searching for an unequivocal affirmation of those biblical doctrines forming the core of protestant, reformed, evangelical Anglicanism will be disappointed. *Being Faithful* rightly highlights the existence of a false gospel in the shape of theological and moral liberalism (p. 3). However, formalism, ritualism, and Romanism are also antagonistic to the true gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. In the pursuit of true spiritual revival they too must be counted as false gospels.

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