

COMMENT ON THE FELLOWSHIP OF CONFESSING ANGLICANS

Jim McPherson

The Global Anglican Future Conference has portrayed itself as the antivenin to liberalism's snake bite. If the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans [FOCA] formed out of the Conference merely functions as a power bloc, it will have squandered its opportunities and become one more poison in the system.

FOCA portrays itself as the champion of biblical fidelity, the only group which takes the authority of Scripture seriously. In the words of an English Anglican Evangelical patriarch, Dr James I Packer, "The Bible, straightforwardly interpreted ... is the Anglican rule of faith." His claim has little foundation in the Thirty-nine Articles, the historic exposition of what may be termed "the Anglican rule of faith".

Article 6 specifies that "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation", so the Article is appropriately titled "of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for salvation". It is silent on the manner of Scriptural interpretation. The Articles are generally vague about this [eg Articles 17, 19, 21 & 34], except for two: Article 28 denounces transubstantiation as "repugnant to the plain words of Scripture", and Article 20 stipulates that "it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another". If anything, the latter suggests that authentic biblical interpretation requires the sense and force of the whole biblical witness be obtained by carefully surveying and assessing all the texts relevant to the question. There is certainly a place for "straightforward interpretation", but it is hardly the whole story as far as the historic Anglican formularies are concerned.

Dr Packer's statement fudges too many issues to be plausible.

Some Scriptures do not lend themselves to straightforward interpretation – both *The Song of Songs* and *The Revelation to John* are enormously problematic for such an approach. One shrinks from commending the actions that the straightforward interpretation of other Scriptures may require, such as the notorious Psalm 137.9; famously, in the third century, Origen made himself a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, on the basis of Matthew 19.12; and how many people put the injunctions of Matthew 5.27-30 into literal effect?

The Church has been selective in its straightforward interpretation of Scripture, anyway. The prohibition of usury is flagrantly ignored. So is the prohibition on blood transfusions, which many Jehovah's Witnesses observe faithfully and sometimes heroically, risking their own lives or the lives of their loved ones.¹

Scripture is itself a mixed bag, with some books theologically and ethically in tension with others - all of which can make straightforward interpretation problematic. *Deuteronomy* and *Job* provide different answers to the question of affliction. *The Letter of James* apparently holds different views about the need or value of believers' good works, when compared with Paul's writings.

As to the political power of the Roman Empire, Paul willingly submits to and endorses it; the *Revelation to John* is openly hostile to it. This lay at the heart of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's dilemma: can a Christian take up arms against the state? He eventually concluded that he was spiritually obliged to participate in the conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler, for which he was subsequently arrested and executed. There are

¹ On usury, see Exodus 22.25, Deuteronomy 23.19-20, Leviticus 25.35-38; nevertheless, Deut 23.20 allowed Israelites to charge interest on their loans to foreigners. In the New Testament, Jesus seems to accept that money can be invested to earn interest [Luke 19.23, Matthew 25.27]; but cf also Lk 6.34-35 and the free forgiveness of debts commended in the Lord's Prayer and elsewhere, on the analogy of God's spendthrift generosity towards us.

The Jehovah's Witness attitude to blood transfusion is based on such passages as Lev 17.10-14, also 7.26-27.

perhaps many Christians who today acknowledge Bonhoeffer as a Christian martyr, yet paradoxically would insist on the “straightforward interpretation” of Scripture.

All of which shows that the interpretive task may be complicated and difficult; and that [at least in principle] interpretation can remain faithful to the Christian Scriptures even if it is not as “straightforward” as some may wish or understand.

Another complicating factor in the interpretive task is discerning how Scripture interacts with the local culture. This was explored at the 1988 Lambeth Conference, in the section “Dogmatic and Pastoral Concerns”.² The following helpfully and aptly summarises their conclusion:

Tradition and reason ... are two distinct contexts in which the Scriptures speak and out of which they are interpreted. It is in the interplay and the conflict between them – between the common mind of the Church and the common mind of a culture – that the meaning of the Gospel for a particular time and place is to be discerned. ... To be involved in this dialogical situation is always uncomfortable. It becomes dangerous, perhaps, only when what is properly a dialogue becomes a monologue delivered at length by one of its parties. Tradition and reason need each other if God’s Word is to be shared.

In the present context, questions have been raised about why FOCA is intolerant of homosexuality whereas many of its African members live in cultures where polygamy amongst Christians is tolerated. This year Andrew Proud, writing from Addis Ababa in *The Global South Anglican*, acknowledged polygamy as one of the very difficult issues which has caused pain and difficulty between Christians and locally accepted social practice.³ Theologically and pastorally, the FOCA constituency is well placed to address this issue on the ground.

But it should also address the underlying theological question of why culture can be allowed to moderate the demands of Scripture in one situation [polygamy] but not another [homosexuality]. Sydney’s Anglican Bishop Glenn Davies addressed this issue in March 2005, but in my view with only limited success.⁴

If not properly addressed, this theological and pastoral issue will severely compromise FOCA’s credibility, as it seems to me at present to be as selective in its adherence to Scripture as any other body of Christians.

There are two other questions associated with FOCA that make it problematic and for me raise doubts about its potential value to the Anglican Communion.

First, it appears that the Conference statement is enmeshed in the very colonialism it seeks to escape. Anglicans may well differ over whether Anglican identity is necessarily determined through recognition by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Final statement speaks of the “manifest failure of the Communion instruments to exercise discipline in the face of overt heterodoxy”. The accompanying press release speaks of “the colonial structures that have served the Anglican Communion so poorly during the present crisis”.

Yet if the Archbishop of Canterbury had intervened and taken the part of either side, it would definitely have been seen as a colonial-style intervention. Instead, the Archbishop has sought to mediate and to reconcile. Since GAFCON leaders were not favoured with his taking their part, they resorted to the

² The material which follows is based on the discussion of Scripture, tradition, and reason, in §§70-91 generally and §§77-84 in particular. The extended quotation is from §84.

³ Andrew Proud, “Split identities, divided loyalties?” 27 May 2008, http://www.globalsouthanglican.org/index.php/comments/split_identities_divided_loyalties [visited 1 July 2008].

⁴ Glenn Davies, “Is polygamy a sin? A consideration of polygamy and the Bible” Briefing #318, March 2005 <http://matthiasmedia.com.au/briefing/library/3511> [visited 1 July 2008]

emotive term “colonial”. If they are to contribute positively to the Anglican Communion, they must rise above such name-calling.

The second is the conundrum which drives the FOCA dynamic. Since the English Reformation, it has been a deeply cherished principle of Anglican polity that each national church is autonomous. The Anglican Communion is a loose confederation of autonomous national churches, with no effective mechanism for disciplining any member church even when it errs in matters of faith and conduct. Both the Canadian and USA member churches followed their national canonical processes and exercised their autonomy accordingly, even if GAFCON and FOCA deplore their outcomes. How, then, is the Anglican Communion to address this effectively, without jettisoning its cherished principle of national autonomy? This is a political conundrum, not a theological one.

Here again, FOCA could be poised to make a positive contribution, so long as it stays at the table – although the Sydney boycott of Lambeth suggests there may not be much ground for hope here. It suggests the opposite: that Sydney’s [and perhaps FOCA’s?] earnest professions of loyalty are subject to the Anglican Communion’s complying with their demands. This is equivalent to the spousal ultimatum, “It’s my way, or the highway”. I do not accept the straightforward interpretation of their profession of loyalty; to me, it has a hollow ring to it.

Now that FOCA is launched, and if it is indeed as loyally committed to the Anglican Communion as its members claim, it will seize the opportunity to contribute theologically and pastorally to the Communion’s ongoing life.

Otherwise, it could be just another poison.

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