

Taking Faith Seriously



by J.I.Packer



Anglican Agenda Series ♦ J.I. Packer, editor

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Preface To The Series

The Anglican Agenda series of publications aims to open up current questions that call for thought, discussion, prayer and decision among members of the Anglican Church of Canada at this time. The series is sponsored by the Essentials movement, which seeks all-round renewal of life and strength in the Anglican Church, and its writers are Anglican Church personnel speaking out of their loyalty to the Church and their acute sense of its present needs. It is hoped that the series will spark deep personal reflection and group discussion within and between parishes, so that we all may be better prepared for the difficult and demanding era into which, as it seems, our Church is now entering.

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When a person falls into convulsions, short-term remedies may for the moment calm him down, but the urgent need is to diagnose the root cause of his trouble and treat that. So it is today with the churches of the worldwide Anglican Communion, a body that is over seventy million strong and growing by leaps and bounds in both Asia and Africa. A much-publicized episcopal decision in Canada to bless same-sex unions as if they were marriages, and the consecrating in the USA of a diocesan bishop who unashamedly lives in such a union, has convulsed global Anglicanism in the way that pebbles thrown into a pond send ripples over the entire surface of the water. Pressure groups and leadership blocs have emerged in Anglicanism's "old West" (Britain, North America, Australasia) resolved to fight this issue till Anglican approval of gay pairings is fully established; tensions over the question between and within provinces, dioceses and congregations have become acute, and there is no end in sight. What, we ask, is the root cause of these convulsions? What would be needed to get us beyond them? The fact we must face is that the clash of views on how, pastorally, to view and help male and female homosexuals grows out of a more basic cleavage about faith. To map this, and suggest what to do about it, is our present task.

What is Faith? A word that slips and slides.

Getting the hang of current Anglican disagreements about faith is not easy, for the word itself is used elusively, and does in fact mean different things to different people, though this fact often goes unrecognized. The way of the "old West" churches, in prayers, sermons, books and discussions that seek to be unitive, is constantly to refer to Anglican faith as a common property held by all who worship, but without defining or analyzing its substance, so that worshippers can go for years without any clear notion of what their church stands for. Theologians rise up to assure us that exact definition is not the Anglican style; they will only affirm that, in idea at least, Anglican faith goes beyond mere orthodoxy (belief of truth)

to orthopraxy (living out that truth in worship and service, love to God and man) — and in saying this they are right so far. But when some think orthodoxy sanctions behaviour that others see orthodoxy as ruling out, it is clear that agreement about the truth we live by is lacking, and that is what we have to look at now.

Complicating our task is the fact that all varieties of the dimension of life that we call religion (Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Bahai, Voodoo, Sikh, New Age, Scientology and the rest) are regularly lumped together with all the versions of Christianity (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, conservative Protestant, liberal Protestant) as so many *faiths*. This usage makes it seem that all religions should be seen as essentially similar—which is probably how most post-Christian Westerners do in fact see them, though in the church this is very much a minority idea. Then, too, we use the word “faith” for whatever hopes about the future individuals cherish and live by (that science will save the planet from ruin; that there will not be another economic crash like 1929; that this or that missing person will be found alive; that this or that cancer can be beaten; that every cloud will have a silver lining; and so on). These broader uses of the word grew up as its former Christian precision dissolved away, so that in modern Western speech “faith” has become a vague term, a warm fuzzy slipping and sliding from one area of meaning to another all the time. In the New Testament, however, “faith” is a Christian technical term, specific in meaning as our secular technical terms (computer, dividend, airplane, spanner, appendectomy, syllabus, for example) are specific in meaning, and its New Testament meaning remained specific for Anglicans till about a century ago. It is something we need to get back to.

What did the apostolic writers have in mind when they spoke of faith? Nothing less than what they took to be the distinctive essence of Christianity: namely, a belief-and-behaviour commitment to Jesus Christ, the divine-human Lord, who came to earth, died for sins, rose from death, returned to heaven, reigns now over the cosmos as his Father’s nominated vice-regent, and will reappear to judge everyone and to take his own people into glory, where they will be with him in unimaginable joy for ever. This was “the faith” that was taught and defended against Gnostic syncretists from the start (we see Paul in Colossians and John in his letters actually doing that); soon it was enshrined in creeds, which began as syllabi

for catechetical instruction of enquirers; and, with its Trinitarian implications made explicit, it has since then been at the heart of mainstream Christianity everywhere. (The Reformers debated with Roman Catholics as to whether faith brings present justification directly, but no one in the debate doubted that real faith includes all that we have described.)

So faith, that is, believing, is in the New Testament a “two-tone” reality, a response to God’s self-revelation in Christ that is both intellectual and relational. Mere credence—assent, that is, to “the faith”—is not faith, nor is commitment to a God or a Christ who is merely a product of human imagination. Christian faith is shaped, and its nature is determined, entirely by its object, just as the impression on a seal is shaped entirely by the die-stamp that is pressed down on the hot wax. The object of Christian faith, as the apostolic writers, the creeds and the Anglican formularies (Articles, Prayer Book, and Solemn Declaration) present it, is three-fold: first, God the Three-in-One, the Creator-become-Redeemer, who throughout history has been, and still is, transforming sinners into a new humanity in Christ; second, Jesus Christ himself, God incarnate and Saviour, now absent from us in the flesh but personally and powerfully present with us through the Holy Spirit; and third, the many invitations, promises, commands and assurances that the Father and the Son extend to all who will receive Jesus as their Saviour and Lord and become his disciples, living henceforth by his teaching in his fellowship under his authority. All of this is laid before us in the Bible, the revelatory book that God has given us for the forming of our faith. In the Bible, faith is a matter of knowing the facts of the gospel (the person, place and work of Jesus Christ), welcoming the terms of the gospel (salvation from sin and a new life with God) and receiving the Christ of the gospel (setting oneself to live as his follower, by repentance, self-denial, cross-bearing, and sacrificial service). Believing the biblically revealed facts and truths about God, and trusting the living Lord to whom these facts and truths lead us, are the two “tones,” the intellectual and relational aspects, of real faith, blending like a chord in music. This is the understanding of faith that needs to be re-established.

We noted above that in our time the word “faith” has become a warm fuzzy, slipping and sliding in use in and out of its Christian meaning to refer to other believings and behavings which, what-

ever else they are, differ in significant ways from what we have described. This fuzzification of faith has developed in parallel to increasing ignorance of biblical teaching, and growing scepticism as to whether that teaching as it stands may properly be called the Word of God. Is there a connection? Yes. When the church ceases to treat the Bible as a final standard of spiritual truth and wisdom, it is going to wobble between maintaining its tradition in a changing world and adapting to that world, and as the wobbles go on uncertainty as to what is the real substance of faith and the proper way of embracing it and living it out will inevitably increase.

But the Bible is currently interpreted in many different ways, and scholars' arguments about its meaning are regularly over ordinary people's heads; so even when Scripture is acknowledged as the standard, is confusion and uncertainty likely to be any less? This is a fair question, and to answer it we need to take a longer, harder look at the Bible than perhaps we have ever done before.

What is the Bible? Faith and the Talking Book.

Most people in churches nowadays have never read through the Bible even once; the older Christian habit of reading it from start to finish as a devotional discipline has virtually vanished. So in describing the Bible we start from scratch, assuming no prior knowledge.

The Bible consists of 66 separate pieces of writing, composed over something like a millennium and a half. The last 27 of them were written in a single generation: they comprise four narratives about Jesus called Gospels, an account of Christianity's earliest days called the Acts of the Apostles, 21 pastoral letters from teachers with authority, and a final admonition to churches from the Lord Jesus himself, given partly by dictation and partly by vision. All these books speak of human life being supernaturally renovated through, in, with, under, from and for the once crucified, now glorified Son of God, who fills each writer's horizon, receives his worship, and determines his mind-set at every point.

Through the books runs the claim that this Jesus fulfils promises, patterns and premonitions of blessings to come that are embodied in the 39 pre-Christian books. These are of three main types: history books, telling how God called and sought to educate the Jewish people, Abraham's family, to worship, serve and enjoy

him, and to be ready to welcome Jesus Christ when he appeared; prophetic books, recording oracular sermons from God conveyed by human messengers expressing threats, hopes and calls to faithfulness; and wisdom books which in response to God's revelation show how to praise, pray, live, love, and cope with whatever may happen.

Christians name these two collections the Old and New Testament respectively. Testament means covenant commitment, and the Christian idea, learned from Paul, from the writer to the Hebrews, and from Jesus himself, is that God's covenant commitment to his own people has had two editions. The first edition extended from Abraham to Christ; it was marked throughout by temporary features and many limitations, like a non-permanent shanty built of wood on massive concrete foundations. The second edition extends from Christ's first coming to his return, and is the grand full-scale edifice for which the foundations were originally laid. The writer to the Hebrews, following Jeremiah's prophecy, calls this second superstructure the new covenant, and explains that through Christ, who is truly its heart, it provides a better priesthood, sacrifice, place of worship, range of promises and hope for the future than were known under its predecessor. Christians see Christ as the true centre of reference in both Testaments, the Old always looking and pointing forward to him and the New proclaiming his past coming, his present life and ministry in and from heaven, and his future destiny at his return, and they hold that this is the key to true biblical interpretation. Christians have maintained this since Christianity began.

Christians call the Bible the Word of God — “God's Word written,” as Anglican Article 20 puts it — for two reasons. The first is its divine origin. Jesus and his apostles always treat Scripture as the utterance of God through the Holy Spirit, transmitted by the agency of men whose minds God moved in such a way that in all their composings they wrote just what he wanted as their contribution to the text and texture of the full Bible that he planned. The Bible's quality of being thus completely shaped by God, so that it may and must always be read as God testifying to himself through the testimony to him of the human writers, is its *inspiration*. The second reason for calling the Bible God's Word is its divine ministry of revealing God's mind to us as the Holy Spirit gives understanding

of what its text says, and thus makes us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (see 2 Timothy 3:14-17). This quality of thus communicating knowledge of God, of his grace and of his Son, is the Bible’s *instrumentality*. Your word is formally the utterance that proceeds from your mouth and substantially the expression and communication of your mind, and so it is with Scripture as the Word of God: formally, more than a million words strung together, substantially, God’s inexhaustible, Christ-centred, salvation-oriented self-revelation to us. The Bible is both God-given and God-giving, and as such it stands as the standard of Christian faith.

Christianity expresses the thought of Scripture as the standard by calling it the *canon*. This is a Greek word, meaning a measuring-rod, and thus a rule. Some have wondered whether the 66-book Protestant canon includes all it should, or contains items that should not be there, but uncertainty about this is unwarranted. There is no good reason for doubting (1) that our Old Testament canon was established in Palestine before Jesus was born, and (2) that the first churches were right to see documents authored and/or approved by apostles as carrying God’s authority and complementing the Old Testament, and (3) that they were also right to claim the Old Testament as Christian Scripture and interpret it as foreshadowing Jesus Christ the Messiah, and the kingdom of God and the new life that came with him.

Nor is there any good reason to fear that the church made mistakes when in the second and third centuries, confronted with spurious Gospels, Epistles and Acts bearing apostolic names, it identified the genuine apostolic writings and dismissed the rest. Nor do there exist outside the canon any documents that for any reason seem to merit inclusion. At the counter-reformational Council of Trent the Roman Catholic church defined into the canon the twelve-book pre-Christian Apocrypha that Jerome had found in the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) and included in his Latin rendering (the Vulgate) in the fifth century; but since these books never belonged to the Hebrew Palestinian canon that Jesus knew the Council’s decision must be judged a mistake. It is precisely the books listed in Anglican Article 6 and found in every printed Bible, neither more nor less, that together form the canonical Word of God.

All God’s people agree that as God’s Word the Bible has author-

ity — God’s authority! What this means is not always clearly seen, but the mainstream understanding is as follows. Authority means the right, and so the claim, to control. Sometimes it operates by agreement, as when authority is given to political leaders, army officers, team captains and policemen, but in this case it is intrinsic. God has authority because he is God, and we should bow to his authority because we are his creatures. What comes through to humble and open-hearted people as they read and study the Bible, or hear it read and taught, is awareness of God’s reality as our almighty, morally perfect and totally awesome Maker, plus the sense that he is telling us truth about relations between him and ourselves, plus a realisation that he is calling for, indeed commanding, faith in him and faithfulness to him, repentance and redirection, self-denial and obedience as the path to the life he wants us to taste here and enjoy to the full hereafter. All of this centres constantly on words and deeds of Jesus, the church’s living Lord and, as we have said, Scripture’s point of reference, who is felt again and again to be stepping out of the book into our lives in order to take them over and change them. The Bible is thus experienced as a book that talks, speaking for itself by pointing us to the Father and the Son who speak for themselves as they offer us forgiveness and acceptance and new life. The authority of Scripture is not just a matter of God putting our minds straight, but of God capturing our hearts for fully committed discipleship to the Lord Jesus. So the Bible is to be approached with reverence, handled with care and prayer, and studied, not to satisfy curiosity in any of its forms, but to deepen responsive fellowship with the God who made us, loves us, seeks us out and offers us pardon, peace and power for righteousness through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The modern world knows virtually nothing of this approach to Scripture. It is vital that the church recover it, follow it and proclaim the need for it everywhere.

For two centuries now in Protestant communities the Bible, like so many more pre-modern things, has been under suspicion — in this case, of being factually false, spiritually wrong-headed, ethically irrelevant, and antihuman in its overall influence. Once, most Westerners knew something of what was in the “good Book” to guide us in our lives; nowadays, however, very few know or care what the Bible teaches. Neither at home nor at school is the Bible

taught, and it has to be said that church Sunday schools, though strong on favourite Bible stories, often fail to acquaint children with the Bible as a whole. Though the criticisms and doubts about Scripture have been compellingly countered over and over again, that does not change the secular mind-set of our culture or banish biblical illiteracy from our midst. Yet ignorance of the Bible remains tragic, for it virtually guarantees ignorance of God. To re-establish in people's minds the truth and wisdom of the biblical message, so that they see they need to know what is in the Bible in order to enjoy a positive relationship with God, is perhaps the church's most urgent task in Canada today.

Who's there? Faith and the Triune God.

We saw that taking faith seriously means taking seriously the fact that Christianity has a given and abiding truth-content; and that therefore we must take the Bible seriously, as the authoritative Word of our self-revealing God; from which it follows that we must take God seriously in the terms in which the Bible displays him. Now we must see what this involves.

A latter-day theological student, we are told, secured an "A" for answering the rather pompous exam question, "What is the significance of Jesus Christ for our postmodern era?" in three words — "Whatever you wish." That catches exactly the way people today think and speak of God: the word becomes a wax nose that can be shaped or, rather, twisted out of shape any way that anyone fancies. But fancy is fantasy, and what we need to know is fact the truth about the God who is there, whom we must all meet on judgment day, and who meets us here and now when we allow the Bible to speak to us. Here is a thumbnail sketch of what the Bible tells us about him.

First, God is **holy**: different and standing apart from us, awesome and sometimes becoming fearsome to us. Holiness is a biblical technical term signifying the God-ness of God, the combined quality of being infinite and eternal, omnipotent omnipresent and omniscient, utterly pure and just, utterly faithful to his own purposes and promises, morally perfect in all his relationships and marvellously merciful to persons meriting the opposite of mercy. God in his holiness is greatly to be praised and worshipped for both his

greatness and his goodness at all times. Many of the Psalms express this.

Second, God is **gracious**. Grace is a New Testament technical term meaning love to the unlovely and seemingly unlovable, love that is primarily not a passion evoked by something in the loved one, but a purpose of making the loved one great and glad: love that to this end gives, never mind the cost, and rescues those in need, never mind their unworthiness. The New Testament focuses throughout on a plan of grace whereby God has redeemed and is now fashioning for endless joy with himself a new humanity, whose members are drawn from a human race — our human race — that is at present ruined and lost.

Third, God is **Triune**. Trinity, the church's word for expressing this internal three-in-oneness, or triunity, is a technical term coined to crystallize something that the Bible demonstrates. Both Testaments affirm that there is only one God, but the New Testament clearly shows us three divine persons acting as a team to carry through the work of grace that saves sinners and creates the church. The first is the Father, who planned everything, who sent his Son to take human nature and die on the cross in his people's place, thus releasing them from the judgment that faced them, and who now justifies (that is, pardons and accepts) them, adopting them as his family and heirs when they put faith in Jesus. The second is Jesus the Son, God incarnate, his Father's servant, our Mediator, who died for us, rose for us, reigns for us and will return for us, the Saviour and Lord whose devoted disciples we are called to be and whom we shall be adoring for ever. The third is the Holy Spirit, the executive, hands-on agent of the Father and the Son in creation, providence and grace, who draws us to faith in Christ by making us see that we need him and that he calls us to come to him, who unites us to him as we receive him, who renews us constantly through word and sacrament, prayer and fellowship, in our new life of discipleship to him, and who from within that life gives us glorious foretastes of heaven's happiness and joy. As the three persons are linked together as sources of blessing, so they are linked as the focus of praise, prayer and benediction. The New Testament writers speak consistently on all of this.

What are we looking at? Not tritheism, a doctrine of three separate gods cooperating; that would in fact be a form of polythe-

ism. Nor is it what has been called modalism, a doctrine of one person playing three separate roles, like the late Peter Sellers in *Dr. Strangelove*; that would in fact be a form of unitarianism. No; by inescapable implication it is a doctrine of the only God as a tripersonal Three-in-One — Trinitarianism in solution, you might say, throughout the New Testament, as sugar is in solution when you have stirred it into your coffee. A reality beyond what our minds can grasp? Yes. (We are only creatures, after all; we should not be surprised to find there is more to our Maker than we can comprehend.) A certainty, evident from the mutual relations that the New Testament reveals between the persons in the divine team? Yes, again. A truth to be affirmed as something that is, even though we do not know how it can be? Exactly. So we settle for it as an authentic apostolic conception, enshrined in and safeguarded by the church's technical Trinitarian vocabulary, and we take care not to lose sight of this truth as we move ahead.

Fourth, God **states ideals for, and sets limits to, human behaviour.** His moral law is found in the Ten Commandments and backup Mosaic material, in the prophets, in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and other teachings, and in the ethical sections of the New Testament letters. Law in Hebrew is *torah*, a word primarily implying not public legislation but family instruction, given with parental authority, goodwill, and concern for the family's wellbeing. It is vital to realise that God's law, expressing as it does his holy will and reflecting his holy nature, fits and fulfils humanity as created; it is the Maker's handbook, we might say, for human happiness, and disregard of it not only displeases God but also damages ourselves. God has made us and redeemed us so that we might bear his image, which includes, along with rational and responsible wisdom, moral perfection that matches his own. "You shall be holy," he says, "for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15-16, citing Leviticus 11:44). This means love and worship with obedience Godward, and love and service with wisdom manward. Pleasing God must always be our goal, and lawless disregard of him, of our fellow-humans, and of the behavioural boundaries that have been set, is always sin, needing repentance if it is to be forgiven. All sin is categorically off

limits; doing evil even in a good cause cannot please God. The Bible delineates many behaviour-patterns that God sees as bad and explicitly forbids.

One restrictive maxim spelled out in both Testaments is that the only right place for gratifying our sexual drive, huge and hungry as it may be, is within monogamous marriage, where mutual sexual pleasure is designed to further both pair bonding and procreation. Homosexual acts are explicitly ruled out. Desires for such acts, like other desires to commit sin, must therefore be resisted in God's strength as strongly as possible. Let it be said that all Christians have lifelong battles with similarly unruly desires in some form, although few such desires are hailed as good and glamourized in the way that homosexual urgings are in today's Western societies, and even in some pockets of today's Anglican and other churches. Certainly, saying no to any mode of inappropriate sexual activity may feel for the moment, to use Jesus's image, like cutting off a hand or a foot, or gouging out an eye — negating, that is, some part of yourself that you feel you cannot live well without — but the way of holiness requires of all of us resolute resistance to a wide range of temptations at point after point in our pilgrimage that give us in the short term this same feeling. The spiritual battles that homosexuals face are thus not entirely unique to them. We all know how sinful desire will masquerade as a special case for which an exception to a general rule may warrantably be made, just as we know all too well the sense of guilt that weighs us down after we have indulged some craving in a way that in our heart we know was wrong. Pastoral care of homosexuals, as of the rest of us, involves strengthening everyone's power to recognize and resist whatever besetting sins they have. So Anglicans for centuries saw the matter, and the historic position was reaffirmed by the Lambeth Conference of 1998.

Such, then, is the God of the Bible, the unchanging God who is always there whatever styles or shifts may mark the culture that surrounds the church. This is the God with whom we all have to deal. In an era like ours, in which Western culture is being constantly reshaped by the rapid mutations of post-Christianity, that fact must be highlighted and insisted on in our

faith and witness. God is the same, Jesus Christ is the same, and essential Christianity is the same, as they were in the first century, when the pagan world was turned upside down by the witness of the apostles.

What went wrong? Faith and the Meltdown of Biblical Truth.

When fallen human reason insists on ruling — that is, making original decisions of its own — in the realm of faith, where as we have seen God's truth should be received on God's authority via God's authoritative written Word, the results are bleak indeed. In comes relativism, the abolishing of all absolute standards for belief and behaviour; in comes scepticism about all longstanding beliefs, as if their age automatically destroys their credibility; in comes pluralism, the confused condition in which we accept incompatibles side by side without full commitment to any of them; in comes agnosticism, the don't-know, can't-be-sure, I-give-up, don't-bug-me state of mind. Each of these -isms is familiar among us today, and the Anglican Church of Canada is sadly enfeebled in consequence.

The process of decline that produced this state of affairs, in which most of Western Protestantism has in fact shared, had two stages. First, from the mid-nineteenth century on, biblical criticism, evolutionary dogma, socialist utopianism and scientific pragmatism have called in question many aspects of biblical teaching and Christian supernaturalism, so that the whole message about Christ, salvation and the church has become blurred, and the doctrinal definiteness that has marked the Christian tradition is felt increasingly to be unwarranted and unconvincing. Then, second, since the middle of the twentieth century some teachers have recast biblical narratives to which they denied factual status (miracle stories, including Jesus's virgin birth, bodily resurrection, and ascension to heaven, in the first instance) as symbolizing aspects of the inner experience of the church and the Christian, and they have read biblical law-codes as directing us to follow the best existing notions of secular justice, and they have spread the idea that loose spiritualizing in this way is the only proper method of biblical interpretation. Its effect, as anyone can see, is to turn Christianity into a historically continuous church-based mysticism of transcendental God-feelings and attitudes of benevolence, none of which depend on any space-time events and all of which, it seems, might cheer-

fully continue into the future even if it could be shown that Jesus Christ had never lived, and that the gospel of salvation from sin is a mere mirage.

The Anglican Church of Canada today has two religions in its womb, or shall we say in its theological colleges, in the minds and hearts of its clergy, in its publications, and in the mentality of its members. There is the historic faith which this little book has tried to identify, and there is the alternative Christianity that we have just described. The former is spelled out in the Book of Common Prayer and was given constitutional status by the Solemn Declaration of 1893; the fingerprints of the latter, sanitized somewhat, can be found in the Book of Alternative Services. One recalls Elijah's call for clearheaded choice at Mount Carmel: "How long will you go limping (some translations, hobbling) between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21).

As the Essentials movement has constantly sought to show, a robust return to the older wisdom about faith's true object is urgently needed if the Anglican Church is ever to impact Canada again. All who take faith seriously should unite to work for this. How wonderful it would be if the 2007 General Synod took the first pioneering steps in this return.

Questions For Study And Discussion

1. Can there be orthopraxy without orthodoxy? If not, why not?
2. How should orthodoxy lead to orthopraxy? Think of examples of how this might or might not happen.
3. How would you explain the nature of faith to a non-churchgoer?
4. How would you explain the importance of the truth of the Trinity to a non-churchgoer?
5. What forms of pastoral care and fellowship can help a person to resist besetting temptations?
6. What is required to achieve and maintain Christian faithfulness in matters of morality?
7. Is it ever true that the world has the wisdom and the church must play catch-up? In what respects, if any, is this claim not true?