

Taking The Church 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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Almighty God, we beseech thee graciously to behold this thy family, for which our Lord Jesus Christ was contented to be betrayed, and given up into the hands of wicked men, and to suffer death upon the cross; who now liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

(First Good Friday collect, *Book of Common Prayer* 1962 Canada)

Grace and the Church

The first step in taking the church seriously must be to recognize that most often when the word “church” enters our minds or exits our mouth this is precisely not what we are doing.

When we use the word as a label for a building (e.g., St. John’s Church) or a denomination (e.g., the Anglican Church), or for a do-gooding group of religious people among whom we find stability and support when we are frazzled (i.e. our own congregation), or when we say on Sunday morning that we are going to church and at lunch that we have been to church, we are as yet quite a distance from the full Christian meaning that the term carries in the New Testament. That, however, is what we are now to seek; and to find it, we cannot do better than turn to Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, where from one standpoint the church is the highlighted theme.

They say that the best way to learn something is to teach it, and that is my story here. Through an odd set of circumstances, before ever I started studying theology academically, I was set to teach a class of ordinands to translate and exegete the Greek text of Ephesians in preparation for an exam that they had to pass before being ordained. They all passed, I am glad to say, and through this experience I became the Ephesians man to my fingertips that I am today.

Ephesians is a tremendously powerful piece of writing, as you can prove for yourself by thoughtfully reading it through ten times without stopping. (Is that a challenge? Yes.) The twin themes that bind its two halves together, the doctrine-praise-and-prayer half in chapters 1-3 and the practical-faithfulness-and-obedience half in chapters 4-6, are the *grace* of God and the *church* of God; the former theme framing and undergirding the latter, and the

latter theme putting the former on large-scale display. We shall now follow Paul as he zeroes in on grace; that is the most direct way to an understanding of the church, as we shall see.

What is *grace*? The word (*charis* in Greek) is a Christian technical term. Its pre-Christian meaning was gracefulness, elegance and charm, and it was not a word of importance. But in Paul's letters in particular, as evidently also in the regular vocabulary of the Christians to whom he wrote (otherwise they would not have understood him), *charis* has become the standard label for the attitude and action of *God in love saving sinners*. That was something that the world knew nothing of until Christianity arrived on the scene. So, because it now carried a new meaning, *charis* became in effect a new word.

To spell this out, as in Ephesians Paul does:

God sees the human race living, so to speak, with their backs to him, offending him right, left and centre by ignoring his instruction and practising self-service according to their own fancy. Deep-rooted egocentricity, which is the essence of original sin, is an infection that no one escapes. And since we do not have it in us to respond positively to any divine word, whether law or gospel, and are in fact totally in the grip of the devil, God counts us as, spiritually speaking, dead, here and now (Eph. 2:1, 5).

But some of us, like Paul himself and those to whom he was writing, both Jews and non-Jews, are now alive to God! That is through God's grace, whereby in love he chose us to be his eternal companions, his sons and his heirs; sent his divine Son into the world to die for our sins, so securing for us our new status of eternal reconciliation, forgiveness and acceptance; brought us to life—personal spiritual responsiveness, that is—by uniting us to the Son in his resurrection life; and bonded us with each other in and through Christ as well. (See chs. 1-2.)

This is the inner reality of becoming a Christian. We are led to acknowledge the love of God, the Father, the Son and the Spirit; to realize the reality and presence with us of the Son, Jesus Christ, in the power of his atoning death and risen life; to trust him and his sacrifice for the cancelling of our guilt; to embrace him in penitent submission to be our Lord and Master from now on; and to love and serve our fellow-believers as our brothers and sisters in Christ.

For when we become Christians we are not alone, and must never think of ourselves as being alone. We are saved individually, one by one, but not for a life of solitary and still self-centred individualism. None of us is the only pebble on God's beach! On the contrary, we have been brought into a new solidarity: that of being, first, adopted children in the Father's family, and then, linked units in God's new creation through union with the risen Christ by the Holy Spirit. This new creation is the reality that is called the *church*.

God's Plan for the Church

Observe now how Paul presents the church in Ephesians. He begins to shine the light on it after declaring that God in grace—"because of the great love with which he loved us"—has given us spiritual life here and now, and set before us a glowing future destiny, by sovereignly uniting us to the risen Lord. "For by grace" he writes "you have been saved through faith...it is the gift of God...For *we are his workmanship*, created in Christ Jesus for good works..." (2:4-10). "Workmanship" (sometimes over-translated as "masterpiece," which signifies both more and less than Paul is expressing) is a word that carries two thoughts. The first is of creation in the sense of *construction*, as a poem, a painting, or a piece of music is a creative artist's construction. The second is of *conjunction*, solidarity resulting from the togetherness of people permanently involved with each other. "Workmanship" is a singular noun; it announces that what God has done for us individually has welded us into a single entity, by virtue of the uniting link that each of us now has with Jesus Christ.

Three basic images, or analogies, each illustrating some ongoing aspect of the simple entity created by the divine workmanship, now follow. These are the *building*, the *body* and the *bride*. Each needs to be looked at separately, to focus its distinct meaning.

First image: On the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with the Lord Jesus as the cornerstone, Gentile and Jewish believers are being built together, as so many building blocks or shaped stones laid side by side, to become "a holy temple in the Lord...*a dwelling place for God* by the Spirit" (2:20-22). As in Old Testament times the temple was where God made people most vividly aware of his self-revealed reality and teaching, and where they in turn knew themselves closest to him (see the Psalms), so it is and will ever be in the church. That is a fact that all Christians should face.

Second image: As in the human body the head—meaning, the mind sustained by the brain inside the skull—animates, controls, directs and integrates the action of the whole organism in its various parts, so the church, which is one body under Christ its head, grows and upbuilds itself in faith and love through the harmonious operation of each particular part. That is to say, as each believer seeks to attain total Christlikeness, and as the Holy Spirit of Christ prompts each to cooperative work and service out of love to God, to neighbours, and to the body of Christ as such, the church moves forward into "the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God...to the measure of the stature of *the fullness of Christ*" (4:4, 11-16). The vision is of divinely managed coordination of all who compose the body, of diversity of ministry within the unity of the body, and of developing discernment of the truth and wisdom of God by the body corporately. That is a goal that all Christians should embrace.

Third image: As the bride is prepared by willing helpers for her wedding day, so Christ himself, the church's bridegroom, works to prepare the church, the object of his love, for the glory that he has in view for her—"that he might present the church to himself *in splendor*, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be *holy and without blemish*" (5:25-27). Ongoing sanctification for all Christians, separately and together, through a vast variety of events, circumstances and conflicts, is accordingly the church's present experience, while the approaching corporate consummation of fellowship with Jesus is the church's abiding hope, and the assurance of Jesus's unfailing love remains its constant support. That is an outlook, and an upward and forward look, that all Christians should cherish, and keep intact.

This is the church that, according to the Nicene Creed, every Christian should believe in: that is, should recognize and confess as real, according to the word of God. The Creed uses four adjectives to describe it, one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

One declares that the church is a single global community in, through, and under Jesus Christ its Lord; a community in which social, racial, creedal and cultural differences between human individuals and groups are transcended, just as Paul says in Galatians 3:26-28.

Holy points to the church's consecration and commitment to the worship, obedience and service of God, which is the central dimension of the active image of Christ, the Son of God, in all his disciples.

Catholic means, not Roman Catholic, but simply worldwide. The word is there as a reminder that the church is in the world for the world, with a mission to the world; and thus the word stands as a roadblock against all forms of sectarianism and social or racial exclusiveness, or anything less than a global outlook. Also, increasingly in recent years "catholic" has been understood qualitatively, to signify holding to the fullness of the faith, as well as to the fullness of the mission.

Apostolic asserts authenticity of belief and purpose. On the one hand, it announces that the church holds to the doctrine taught by the apostles, and that bodies based on different beliefs (e.g., the Unitarian churches, or the Mormon community, which styles itself the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), are no part of Christ's church, despite the fact that they claim the name. On the other hand, it declares that the church's abiding goal is to disciple all the nations, according to the Great Commission that the risen Lord gave the apostles (Mt. 28:19-20).

Such is the church as God sees and knows it, and as it is set forth in the New Testament for us to see and know in this way too. It is the centrepiece of God's plan to display his mind-boggling wisdom and goodness to all the angelic powers (see Eph. 3:8-11), and it ought to be the central focus of

our own thoughts as we seek to fulfill our vocation of glorifying God (that is, honouring, praising and thanking him for his praiseworthiness) when we contemplate the blessings of our creation, preservation, and salvation. It needs to be said that Christians who do not recognize that the Christ-centredness of their calling requires of them church-centredness as a habit of mind are at that point really sub-standard.

The Church and the Churches

What has been said has surely made us aware that, whereas our own thinking about the church ordinarily takes off from local gatherings, situations and experiences, Paul's regular starting-point was God's great plan for the church universal—perhaps four figures strong in his day, but more than ten figures—actually, two billion strong in ours, not counting the saints who are in glory already. How then did he relate the various small congregations that he knew and served, several of which he had himself founded, to this larger reality in which he so fervently believed? His letters indicate. In Romans 12, explicitly addressing “everyone among you,” he says: “As in one body we have many members” (the word means, body parts), “and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...” (Rom. 12:3-6). A list of capacities for ministry, gifts of speech, of service and of lifestyle, then tumbles out, in haphazard order, but all directed to the inner health of the Roman congregation. And again, writing to the church at Corinth, Paul says: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it...” (1 Cor. 12:12, 27). Paul is applying to the local church the same theology that he developed for discussing the life of the church as a single global unit, as he does in Ephesians 4:11-16, and this is very significant.

What it means is that for Paul the local church is called to be a miniature presentation of what the universal church is called to be. It is to be an out-crop, microcosm, sample and specimen of the larger reality. It must see itself that way, and act accordingly. Each local congregation must understand itself as a subset of the global fellowship, a small-scale embodiment of that fellowship's life for all to see. And it is first and foremost by being a worthy embodiment that each such gathering brings glory to God.

From the human standpoint, the local church is a group of believers who band together to meet on a regular basis and do all the things that, according to the New Testament, the church does—praise and pray together; maintain ministry of the word and sacraments; practise pastoral care and pastoral discipline towards each other; give and help where there is need;

and reach out with the gospel to the neighbourhood and beyond. Every-member ministry, in which all the gifts that God gives are put to work, is part of the ideal. At the same time, it is basic to the New Testament pattern that there be one or more servant-leaders for each congregation with a stated role of preaching, teaching and paternal oversight, and with personal responsibility both to the congregation and to God for faithfulness in that task. This shepherding ministry of leadership and coordination is essential for congregational health and strength.

This, with all the rest of what we have said so far, establishes the frame of reference and directly sets the stage for what now becomes the centre of our attention, namely Anglicanism today.

Anglicanism

What is *Anglicanism*? Basically, it is the way of being and doing church that was shaped in England in the sixteenth century, as one of the fruits of Western Europe's Reformation. Two key planks in the Anglican platform at that time were submission to the authority of Holy Scripture, as "God's Word written," to quote Article 20, and acceptance of the doctrine of the 39 Articles of 1563, with their stress on justification through Christ alone by faith alone and on salvation by grace alone. The Church of England was and is a federation of some 10,000 parishes, organized into episcopally led dioceses divided into two provinces, with the Archbishop of Canterbury as the prime primate. It is unique in being established by law as the church of the nation. Wales, Scotland and Ireland are separate provinces, each smaller than their English counterparts. By contrast, the USA is one huge province geographically, and so is Canada. Devoted missionary work has birthed further self-governing provinces all round the world. The Anglican Communion, that is, the association of all these provinces together, has getting on for 1,000 bishops and 80 million members. What marks the Communion out, and gives it a sense of identity distinct from that of other Protestant church families, is, first, its worship style, rooted in or at least developed from the Reformation/Restoration Prayer Books of 1549, 1552, and 1662, and, second, its retention of bishops as the head persons of dioceses. What has kept it together thus far is a sense of the unique richness of its heritage, plus goodwill all round. Whether, or in what form, it can stay together in light of its current internal cleavages, is as of now anyone's guess.

There have long been different types of Anglicans with divergent opinions on many matters, but in the past all the groups have characteristically shown a strong sense of Christian and historical proportion, of mutual respect, and of the need for credible outward expression of the church's given unity in Christ. This mindset has made Anglicans down the centuries into ecumenical pioneers. Until recently it was understood that Anglicans sought

consensus, waited for each other, and took no action that might marginalize or disfranchise any body of responsible Anglican opinion. It is the current change at this point that threatens the togetherness of the Anglican Communion. A damn-your-eyes habit of mind has taken over in certain quarters, and it is apparent that the end is not yet.

What are *bishops*? Clergy leaders, appointed to manage dioceses. Thereby hangs a tale, which, since it is often beclouded with baffle gab, I shall try to tell in the simplest terms possible.

In the New Testament, members of the appointed groups of leaders in local churches are called both elders (presbyters, as in Jewish synagogues) and bishops (*episkopoi*, a functional word meaning those who oversee others).

By the early second century, however, in most churches if not all, the title of bishop was being reserved for the leadership group's leader. This was a natural development, though we know nothing of how it actually happened, for leaderless groups tend to drift, and having a group leader (team captain, as we might say) always makes sense.

Then in the early fourth century, as part of his policy to make Christianity the most favoured religion, Constantine divided the Empire into administrative areas called dioceses for bishops to run, as civil governors (prætors) ran Rome's provinces. The bishop of the major city in each diocese became the area manager, overseeing all clergy and congregations within his jurisdiction as the chief disciplinary officer of the diocese. To keep out heretical bishops, who were very much part of the fourth-century scene, the rule was established that each bishop's jurisdiction in his own diocese was exclusive. With the authority of custom, this rule still holds wherever bishops are found, and some treat it as unchangeable, like the laws of the Medes and Persians. Custom, of course, regularly imposes a false sense of permanence. But change here is now becoming imperative, as we shall shortly see.

In the Middle Ages the belief developed that bishops were carriers and transmitters of an apostolic commission, stemming from Jesus himself, without which neither the episcopal ordination of priests nor the sacraments that priests administered would be valid—that is, used as a channel of grace by God. Roman Catholicism still maintains this concept of apostolic succession, and so do some Anglicans, but it is no part of Anglicanism's self-definition, and John Wesley once wrote of it as “a fable that no man ever did or could prove.”

During the Middle Ages, diocesan bishops became deeply involved in civil as well as ecclesiastical administration, and when England's new Prayer Book ordinal of 1549 defined and highlighted the spiritual tasks of bishops, this political involvement did not cease. To this day English bishops are appointed by the Prime Minister on the monarch's behalf, as so many servants

of the crown. The post-Reformation history of the English episcopate shows ongoing oscillation between political commitments (like sitting in the House of Lords during its sessions); pastoral leadership as preacher, teacher, ordainer, confirmer, counsellor of clergy and reconciler of parish wars; and church administration (choosing, ordaining, appointing, licensing and disciplining clergy, plus organizing, strategizing, fundraising and so on, as need has required); with each bishop pursuing his personal priorities within this varied frame of activity. Such, apart from the politics, has been the pattern of episcopacy outside England too. Of necessity, a great deal of discretionary power goes with the bishop's job; how could it be done otherwise? So power becomes integral to the idea of the bishop in people's minds, including sometimes the minds of bishops themselves.

Is this setup biblical? If you mean, is it mandated or exemplified in the Bible, the answer is no, although its ancestry and reflection of the ministry performed by the apostles and their deputies, as we see it in the pastoral epistles in particular, is clear. But if you mean, does it express New Testament principles and priorities regarding the local church's life, and does it meet the New Testament requirement that everything in the church be geared for edification, then the answer is surely yes, and the incidence of bad bishops from time to time does not invalidate that answer. Episcopal ministry in idea, if not always in reality, embodies the connectional link between congregations that our given unity in Christ demands, and can provide unifying leadership for the diocese, just as the consultations of the House of Bishops should do for the province, and as the primates' meetings should do for the Anglican Communion as a whole. The demands of Anglican-defined episcopal office, if taken seriously, will doubtless drain the energy of its occupants, but those they lead will be enriched, so that their dioceses will have every reason to thank God for them.

But—and this is a big “but”—if Anglican dioceses are to be blessed with a steady flow of bishops of this kind, two conditions have to be met. Bishops must be well chosen and well monitored by those they lead; and in saying this I have laypeople particularly in view. Many dioceses in many places languish for lack of responsible, discerning episcopal elections and a set pattern of realistic episcopal accountability. As regards the former, voters regularly treat concern for doctrinal faithfulness as a minor thing, and allow other factors to decide their choice. As regards the latter, mutual accountability enters into all healthy Christian relationships without exception, and the effect of its absence is ordinarily, to say the least, less than happy, so that to exempt bishops from it does no favour either to them or to us. What then is the problem here? Lay apathy, I am afraid, which lets bishops, once in place, do pretty much whatever they want to do, without challenge. This is to say in effect that Anglican episcopacy, all the world over, is at this point

an under-developed institution, and that until change comes Anglican congregations are more likely than not to suffer from this fact.

The Worldliness Virus

The New Testament teaches us to think of the world as the human community organized explicitly without God and implicitly against God, as the devil leads, and to define worldliness as conformity to the world's ways. Anglicanism, by reason of its historic involvement with national community life in so many places, is constantly vulnerable to worldly influences, which operate as do viruses both in the human bloodstream and in the electronic brains of computers, infecting, damaging, and threatening to destroy the entire system. A perfect, large-scale instance of this is the current inclination of leaders in what we may call Old Western Anglicanism, that is, Anglican dioceses and provinces in Britain, North America and Australasia, to rate gay unions under certain conditions as a form of holiness, parallel to marriage and pleasing to God. This reflects, of course, the affirmative attitude towards homosexual behaviour that has come to mark secular society in the countries mentioned. We label this view, as its own adherents do, *liberal*, and the opposite view *conservative*, or, better, *conservationist*, since it treats the biblical condemnation of homosexual activity as revealed truth from God, permanently valid and thus to be adhered to as one element in our discipleship to Jesus Christ.

Behind this direct parting of the ways lie two factors, both of which are about half a century old. The first factor is a reconceiving of the task of Christian mission as simply speaking, and modelling, love and justice to all the world, in terms that the secular community will immediately recognize and endorse as matching its own highest ideals. The second factor is the decriminalizing of homosexual behaviour throughout the English-speaking world, so that gay identities, values and goals may now be paraded in public without restriction or inhibition. And the world presses the church similarly to sanction homosexual relationships. The Anglican Communion, which maintained the conservationist position unambiguously as recently as the Lambeth Conference of 1998, is currently at odds over this question, and over the clashing views of biblical authority that the rival positions entail. Inter-provincial and intra-diocesan fellowship have suffered, realignments involving overlapping jurisdictions have taken place, and arrangements to found a new North American province are now under way. It is a sorry scene, and one of which the worldliness virus is a direct cause.

It has been said, mainly by persons who desire to lead all of Anglicanism along the liberal path, that this difference of opinion, however distressing, should not be seen as church-dividing, that is, as warranting withdrawals, realignments, and any restricting or restructuring of Anglicanism's present

internal communion, part with part. Space does not permit me to discuss that thesis here, but I must at once point out that any church body that deliberately and publicly embraces approval of gay behaviour in any form *prima facie* undercuts its own claim to be

- (1) **holy**, in biblical terms, at least in the sexual realm;
- (2) **catholic**, since this is a minority view, which Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and most of the Protestant world, see as heretical;
- (3) **apostolic**, since Paul specifically rules out homosexual relationships in all forms as incompatible with kingdom-of-God living;

and makes it virtually meaningless for it then to claim to be part of the church that is *one*, and which this church body has now itself disrupted.

Schism

This paradoxical claim leads us to the subject of schism, on which we need now to focus.

The word *schism*, a Greek word originally, means a division or split of some kind. It has a long history in the church as a heavy-duty term of censure; that is, as a label for what is seen as causeless, needless, unwarranted and unjustifiable dividing of the church visible here on earth. As we have already said, unity in Christ through union with Christ is God's gift to all believers, and is a reality which the church is under obligation to display to the world every way it can. Schism is irresponsible disrupting of a previously united unit of the worldwide church of Christ, and has always been perceived as a sinful breach of the shared conviction and consensual love that should be binding together all members of the unit in full fellowship with each other. This diagnosis applies, whether the unit that splits is a single congregation, or a denominational group of congregations, or a diocese or province, Anglican or otherwise. Those accused of schism always justify their withdrawal by claiming that the unit's unfaithfulness to Christ and the Bible drove them to it, making separation the only course of action by which they could preserve their own faithfulness, and keep clear of the spiritual betrayal into which the unit had fallen. Accusations of schism regularly fly both ways, one group accusing the other of causing division by their separation and the other protesting the undermining of true Christianity that was the cause of their conviction that they had to withdraw. The dictum that the real schismatic is not necessarily the one who separates but the one who causes the separation, has a long history, as of course does the cynical strategy, give a dog a bad name and hang it.

Here are two historical illustrations of the reality of schism.

- (1) When the Donatists had withdrawn from the catholic church in the fourth century, judging it irremediably defiled by still accepting leaders who under persecution had let it seem they were renouncing their faith, Augustine argued that they were cutting their own throats spiritually by refusing to exercise forgiving love. His point was eventually taken, and the Donatists rejoined the catholic Christian communion. Here, doctrine was not the issue, only discipline.
- (2) When in the sixteenth century Papal officialdom accused the Reformers and their followers of schism because they had abandoned Rome's jurisdiction, the comeback was that Rome's Christianity had become so misshapen, and its errors about salvation so deeply rooted, that Rome had in effect unchurched itself, and withdrawal was therefore necessary in order to put the church, country by country, back in shape again in its faith and life. Today, the language of schism is hardly heard on either side of this divide; Roman Catholic leaders and their conservationist Protestant counterparts hail each other as separated brethren and cooperate in various theological enterprises aimed at convergence and consensus. But it is well to remember that the differences regarding belief and behaviour are still too great to allow any form of reunion, at least by biblical standards. The Reformation disagreements about the infallibility and authority of the church, and the way of salvation, divide us still.

Recently, the phrase *internal schism* has been coined to describe situations in which, without actual separation, warring groups within the same church structure restrict church communion in some way. An example of this was the action of almost a hundred members of the 2002 Synod of the diocese of New Westminster, who, when the bishop responded favourably to the Synod's majority request that he initiate the blessing of same-sex unions, declared themselves out of communion with him and the Synod till this decision was rescinded, and walked out to show that they meant what they said. Following this, the congregations that they represented withheld their diocesan apportionments *pro tem.*, while they sought direct dialogue with the diocese regarding the issue itself (a request that unhappily was not granted). Other cases of internal schism beginning with protest over this same matter have since surfaced in various parts of North America.

Orientation

Anglicans in Canada, willy-nilly, must face the question, how to position themselves in the situation that has now developed, whereby a new prov-

ince of orthodox faith, territorially overlapping both the Anglican Church in Canada (ACC) and the Episcopal Church in the USA (TEC) is being formed. Its first members will be the thousands of refugees, if we may so call them, whose dioceses or provinces have embraced the view that well-meant gay unions are a mode of holiness parallel to marriage and should be blessed accordingly, and by rejecting their conscientious opposition to this have in effect squeezed them out. Both provinces denounce the new move on the grounds that overlapping episcopal jurisdictions contravene historic catholic practice, and they are stone deaf to the argument that when whole dioceses, led by their bishops, go off the rails, alternative jurisdiction becomes a necessity. So although the new venture has been welcomed by the GAFCON group of primates (that is, those present at the Conference on the Global Anglican Future, held in Jerusalem in June, 2009), and although the Archbishop of Canterbury has declined a request to declare himself out of communion with those who are realigning, both the Canadian and American provinces refuse so far to think or speak well of what is being done. In these circumstances, all faithful Anglicans must ask themselves, what ought I to do now for the furthering of the true gospel, the good of tomorrow's church and the world-wide Christian mission, and the glory of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?

Key considerations bearing on this question are as follows.

- (1) The presenting issue (the conflicting evaluations of homosexual partnerships) is a major matter, for three reasons. **First reason:** the question is practical, not just theoretical. Whereas previous doctrinal differences within Anglicanism have all been matters of opinion that scarcely touched on actual conduct except perhaps at motivational level, this contention seeks to rehabilitate and celebrate as virtue behaviour that Scripture identifies, in black and white as it were, as sin (see Lev. 18:22, 20:13; Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; 1 Tim. 1:8-10). **Second reason:** our salvation itself is directly involved, for we find Paul warning his readers that homosexual behaviour bars the way to the kingdom of God, and in the next breath joyfully celebrating the fact that the Holy Spirit had enabled Corinthian believers to break their own homosexual habits, which we know were much encouraged by the Corinthian culture (see 1 Cor. 6:11). **Third reason:** sex is an important aspect of our being (no one today will dispute that), and God's purpose for sex, over and above personal pleasure and mutual bonding, is, as it always was, procreation, the continuance of the human race (Gen. 1:28). To indulge sexual desire in a way that makes sex barren is, quite simply, defying the divine purpose.

- (2) If the testimony of Scripture can be trusted (and it can!), Jesus Christ the Lord, the God-man, as divine as his Father and as human as we are, loves the church, and has invested himself to a breath-taking degree in the programme of redeeming her and leading her, as his bride, to a perfection of holiness that matches what he himself modelled here on earth. And if Scripture can further be trusted, Paul and his fellow-apostles had the mind of Christ, so that when they taught Christ taught through them, and what they taught was his teaching. But if that is so, then those who would sanction gay unions contradict Christ.
- (3) Pastoral care of fellow-believers is every Christian's business. Certainly, the clergy must lead here; they are explicitly charged to teach, guard, nurture and equip the flock, keeping them in order and setting them to work. But serving, helping, watching over and caring for others is not just the clergyperson's job; it is a universal Christian obligation. All of us, then, must clear our minds as to what constitutes pastoral care in the church, and specifically pastoral care of persons who experience same-sex attraction. Should we affirm and support them as they enter into physical partnerships? Is this how the *agape*-love that seeks their welfare is to be expressed? Or does *agape*-love require us rather to affirm and support them by forming bonds of friendship with them, and within those bonds seeking to fortify them against yielding to the urgings that they have to live with? The two strategies are exclusive of each other; there is no fence here for anyone to sit on. Before God, clergy and laity alike have to make up their minds. And if the testimony of Scripture is really trusted, this will not prove hard to do.
- (4) The forming of the new, biblically-based province (the Anglican Church in North America, ACNA) raises the question, who, besides the ecclesiastical refugees mentioned above, should join it, and when. Certainly, it is being born in a great wave of enthusiasm, and, equally certainly, it will carry great hopes for the future, whereas the ACC and TEC are currently generating only great fears. But any active recruiting from ACC or TEC—sheep-stealing, that is—would itself be slippage towards schism, and must not happen. It is true that the presence of unacceptable and seemingly incurable lapses, doctrinally and ethically, in these provinces sets Christians free to look for a more congenial spiritual home, where the true reality of the one church as God sees and knows it is better expressed. But existing ministry obligations of one sort or another

may well demand that for the present, however unhappily, one stays where one is. In any case, decisions to change one's congregation, and in this case one's jurisdiction also, should not be made hastily, nor without consultation and prayer, lest one's enthusiasm override one's discernment and one's judgment. The grass the other side of the fence always looks greener, and it has often been said that any who think they have found a perfect church should not join it, since they would spoil it. The safe path is to be quick to pray but slow to move; and we must never lose sight of the fact that a renewing, reviving visitation of the Holy Spirit, such as I imagine my readers are already praying for, can remove roadblocks in a very remarkable way. The bottom line is that all should seek God's guidance as to what they should do with reference to the new arrival, and meantime seek to show goodwill and *agape*-love to all parties; and if we become sure that God is directing us to withdraw and realign, then to follow the rule John Wesley made for members of his Methodist societies: if you must leave, go out quietly.

May God in his wisdom and mercy guide us all.

Almighty and everlasting God, by whose Spirit the whole body of the Church is governed and sanctified; Receive our supplications and prayers, which we offer before thee for all estates of men in thy holy Church, that every member of the same, in his vocation and ministry, may truly and godly serve thee; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

(Second Good Friday collect, *Book of Common Prayer 1962 Canada*)



Questions for Study and Discussion

1. How would you demonstrate the central place of the church in the saving purpose of God?
2. What ministry has God given you in your local congregation?
3. How should local churches relate to each other?
4. What do you see as the major elements in the Anglican heritage? What value do you set on them?
5. How would you meet the criticism that forming a new Anglican province in territory where an Anglican presence already exists is a schismatic act?
6. What are the proper priorities of a local Anglican congregation?
7. How should we care for fellow-worshippers in the congregations of which we are part?

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