

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Winter 2010 No. 115

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“BEING FAITHFUL: THE SHAPE OF HISTORIC ANGLICANISM TODAY”

Open letter sent from the Council of Church Society to the members of the GAFCON Theological Resource Group.

We are grateful to you for your work, as part of the GAFCON Theological Resource Group on “*Being Faithful*”, the Commentary on the Jerusalem Declaration. We note that it is commended to the wider church for further discernment. The Council of Church Society has therefore considered and discussed the report and wishes to draw a number of matters to your attention.

The Society was founded in 1835 to uphold the doctrines of the Church of England and to maintain that church as a Protestant, Reformed and national church. We are therefore wholeheartedly in agreement with your emphasis upon the need to uphold Biblical teaching and resist those theological innovations which threaten the integrity and fidelity of the Anglican Communion today.

We have a variety of specific points to make on the Jerusalem Declaration and its commentary, and these are as follows:

1. We believe it is important to affirm unequivocally that Anglicanism is Protestant, and that the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, which constitute our distinctive confession, are also firmly Protestant.
2. It is also important in making reference to the Thirty-nine Articles to state that what is required is assent to them in their plain sense. Much mischief has been caused by attempts to distort the meaning of the Articles so that they bear meanings they were never intended to have. This came to full fruition with people assenting to Creeds or Articles without actually believing in them at all.

Justification

3.1 The Council is concerned that the Jerusalem Declaration, in referring to the gospel of justification by grace, through faith, does not affirm that we are justified by grace alone, through faith alone. We believe Martin Luther was correct to state that justification is the “*article of the standing and falling of the church.*”

3.2 We had been hopeful that this omission would be rectified by the Commentary, and our concern therefore increased when we read what is stated on page 28 about Clause 1. Article XI is rightly alluded to but the Commentary omits the crucial word “only” (which is, of course, present in Article XI). As you know, the Article states that “*we are justified by Faith only*” and that this “*is a most wholesome Doctrine, and very full of comfort*”. This is a fundamental and distinguishing doctrine of authentic Anglicanism and it is noteworthy that the Article refers to the lengthy explanation of the doctrine in the *Homily on Justification* (more often called *The Homily on the Salvation of Mankind*).

3.3 We think that it is essential that the Theological Resource Group affirm the historic Anglican teaching on justification by grace alone, through faith alone and assert that it stands firmly by the doctrine of the Thirty-nine Articles on this crucial point. The present omissions from the Jerusalem Declaration and Commentary are serious and in need of urgent rectification.

3.4 In addition, Clause 1 does not address the important distinction between conferred

righteousness and imputed righteousness. The former (an erroneous Roman Catholic doctrine) should be rejected and the latter should be upheld alongside justification by faith alone as the true, Biblical doctrine of historic, orthodox Anglicanism. Related to this, we note that while neither Clause 1, nor the commentary on it, affirm imputed righteousness, the phraseology actually adopted in both places is ambiguous and blurs the critical 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 Book of Common Prayer

4. In addition, the Jerusalem Declaration and the Commentary need to give greater weight to the doctrinal purpose of the Book of Common Prayer (“BCP”). The Declaration describes it as “*a true and authoritative standard for worship and prayer*”, and this point is likewise made in the Commentary. However, in the Church of England, the BCP is more than this; it is part of the formularies and thus, by law, part of our doctrinal standard. This point is made on page 35 of the Commentary where it states of the Articles “*They have long been recognised as the doctrinal standard of Anglicanism, alongside the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal*”. This is good, but we think it ought to be clearer elsewhere and we regret that the Declaration was not more explicit on this point.

The Atonement

5.1 Clause 5 of the Jerusalem Declaration makes reference to the ‘atoning death’ of Christ. Commenting on this, (on page 44) it is stated 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, we believe that it is important to be clearer about the nature of the atonement.

5.2 First, given the present confusion in the church, it is important to affirm that Christ’s death was substitutionary. He died in our place and the punishment for our sins was laid on Him. This is articulated in the formularies in the BCP service for the administration of the Lord’s Supper. For example the BCP describes Christ’s sacrifice as a “*propitiation for our sins*” (quoting 1 John 2.1), while in the communion prayer it is asserted to be a sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction. Thus the objective nature of the atonement is clearly affirmed: Christ is our substitute, taking on himself the punishment for our sin. Through the cross the justice of God is satisfied and the wrath of God, which is the right and just response to sin, is turned from us and falls instead on Christ.

5.3 We also believe the reference to the restoration of fellowship with God (on page 44) requires amplification. Restoration of fellowship is a consequence of the atonement, but not its primary effect. The Fall was first and foremost a breach of divine command (Adam and Eve disobeyed God) from which flowed the severing of fellowship with God, leading to the expulsion from Eden. In undoing the curse, Christ was first and foremost obedient to the Father, sin was atoned for by Christ, and consequently fellowship with God was restored in Christ.

5.4 While recognising the constraints of time we nevertheless suggest that the Theological Resource Group should seek to produce a separate paper which articulates the Anglican teaching on salvation.

Working with others

6. In our own work over many years we have drawn a useful distinction between fellowship and co-belligerence. The latter means working with others on issues of common concern both within the life of the Church and in the wider community. Fellowship springs from a shared faith in Christ and necessarily entails agreement on some of the fundamental truths revealed by God. In the western church, faced as we are with radical theological liberalism within the church and by rampant secularism in the world around, we are in danger of claiming fellowship with people who do not agree on the fundamentals of faith, simply in order to feel stronger and appear more numerous. We believe it is far better to admit graciously and candidly where such fundamental differences exist, endeavour to work together wherever necessary, but not to claim fellowship where true fellowship cannot exist.

Anglican Orthodoxy

7.1 The Commentary on the Jerusalem Declaration (and accompanying papers) contains much material on “*Anglican identity*”; “*orthodox faith and practice*”, “*tradition and churchmanship*”, “*legitimate diversity*”, “*authentic Anglicanism*”, “*Anglican orthodoxy*” and “*the Anglican via media*”. However, we remain unclear as to what is, in the final analysis, considered to be the necessary core of Anglican belief.

7.2 The GAFCON Statement implies that the Church of England’s Canon A5 forms a minimum doctrinal standard of authentic Anglicanism. The Jerusalem Declaration is presented within the Statement as the basis for fellowship built on this doctrinal standard (*Being Faithful* pp5, 22 and 23). However, the Introduction to the Statement says, apparently with reference to public confession of the Apostolic faith:

“It is not a test of orthodoxy for all Anglicans. 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 it is unacceptable. We could not count someone as a faithful Christian, let alone a faithful Anglican, if they did not adhere to the Apostolic faith. If there is a core to what it means to be a faithful Anglican then we contradict ourselves if we say that we count as faithful Anglicans those who do not accept that core. We are concerned therefore that this section in the Introduction leaves the door open to doctrinal errors that have undermined orthodox, biblical Anglicanism.

Roman Catholicism

8.1 Section 1.2.2 of the appended report, “*The Way, Truth and Life*”, produced in preparation for the GAFCON, makes reference to relations with other churches (page 101 of *Being Faithful*). Reference is rightly made to the fact that the Articles of Religion should be normative, but later in the same section it is said that “*Anglican Orthodoxy*”: “*is eager to participate in ecumenical dialogue and partnerships, with Roman Catholics... and the Orthodox*”

While we have no objection to certain forms of dialogue with Roman Catholics and the Orthodox, it is impossible to think that orthodox, 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 very heart of the gospel. The Roman Catholic Church has anathematised some of the truths which we affirm to be essential. There is nothing to be gained by using ambiguous language to conceal this as an earlier generation of liberal ecumenists did (quite apart from the fact that to do so is wrong in principle).

Church Society Council