

Where next for confessional Anglicanism?

Mark D Thompson

In 2008 something remarkable happened that rocked the Anglican Communion to its core. In June that year, just over 1100 men and women gathered in Jerusalem for the first Global Anglican Future Conference. 291 of them were bishops. 8 of them were duly elected Primates of Provinces in the Communion, representing by far the majority of active, committed Anglicans around the globe. They gathered to encourage each other, to hear each other's stories, and to reaffirm their commitment to the confessional basis of global Anglicanism. The chair of the conference, Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria, described what was happening as a rescue mission. These men and women were determined to rescue confessional Anglicanism and provide the conditions in which it might flourish. It was a highly significant moment. Many who were there wept as at last our leaders had the courage to stand and face the liberal churches of the Communion, and even the Archbishop of Canterbury himself, and say 'No'. 'Not any more. We are not going to stand by and let you drag us further away from the gospel, the Scriptures and our Anglican heritage.' 'No'.

But they weren't *just* saying 'No'. This was not intended as, and it was not in reality, a protest movement. It was not merely reactive. Sure the catalyst for the idea came from the actions of the churches in America and Canada and the refusal of the Archbishop of Canterbury to act decisively in repudiating those actions. But that was simply a catalyst. It could not be what defined this new movement and those who planned the conference knew that. They knew there was something more important than that. The Anglican structures had failed but they knew that the answer was not to set up new structures. So, the leaders and the people gathered in Jerusalem to stand

together and affirm their commitment to the Anglican heritage we have been hearing about from Ashley Null this morning. And because they were seeking to be true to classic, authentic, confessional Anglicanism, they insisted that what was happening in Jerusalem during those days was not ultimately about Anglicanism at all. It was about the gospel. Confessional Anglicanism is not about structures and offices and canons — these are all incidental means to an end. And that end is the gospel. What matters far more than any institution or culture or way of doing things is the gospel, the life-giving message about Jesus and the salvation he has won for us.

It might be a while since you've read the Jerusalem Declaration that emerged from that landmark conference. Let me remind you of its first clause:

We rejoice in the gospel of God through which we have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Because God first loved us, we love him and, as believers, bring forth fruits of love, ongoing repentance, lively hope and thanksgiving to God in all things.

You see, it is the gospel, right up front. It is about making sure people hear what we have heard, hear about Jesus — his perfect life, his atoning death, his glorious resurrection and ascension.

We are only a couple of years away from the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. It was that great movement that gave birth to Anglicanism as we know it. Thomas Cranmer, the chief architect of Reformation Anglicanism, was heavily influenced by Martin Luther, and more particularly his off-sider Phillip Melanchthon. He corresponded with Calvin. He invited Martin Bucer to England and sought the advice of Heinrich Bullinger. And with all of them Cranmer shared an unswerving commitment to the gospel of God's grace in Christ and the power of a sustained engagement with Scripture to shape the hearts and minds of men and women so they will receive the gospel of God's grace in Christ.

Anglicanism that is true to itself is never first and foremost about Anglicanism, but about the gospel. And so the very first thing I want to say is that confessional Anglicanism has a future only if it remembers this critical truth. To the extent to which we are about the gospel, taking the gospel to this needy city and nation and going out from here to speak the gospel and stand with others who are speaking the gospel around the world, we, as confessing Anglicans, have an exciting future. This gospel still is the powerful way God saves people — if I remember rightly, that's John Chapman's paraphrase of Romans 1.16. Under God's good hand, the gospel comes, as it came to the Thessalonians, 'not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction' (1 Thess. 1.5). But to the extent to which our eyes are turned inward and we are preoccupied with our structures and offices and canons and all the rest, the future is a bleak one. That's why the Viability Report prepared for General Synod last year was such a disappointment.

So we need to be, and must always be, gospel people before we are Anglican people. And paradoxically, when we are, we will truly be Anglican people. Remember, the chief vehicle of the real changes Cranmer wished to make was not the parliament, though the parliament was involved; not the king, though he too was undoubtedly involved; not canons or rules or regulations or properly ordered offices. It was a liturgy saturated with Scripture and shaped by the gospel. Cranmer created services that were full of Scripture and the language of Scripture. *Liturgy* was not what mattered most to him, contrary to the legends that were created in later centuries; an opportunity for *Scripture* to impact its hearers mattered most to him. That's what his liturgies were all about. So, his lectionary gave a systematic coverage of Scripture that would mean the Old Testament would be read in a year, the New Testament three times a year, and the Psalter once a month. And he did that so that men and women would hear and come to grips with the gospel, or better, that the gospel could come to grips with them: so that they would know and believe how sinful they were and how in need of a

Saviour they were; so that they would see God's tremendous provision in the one who gave himself as a ransom for many; so that they would understand that this gospel changes everything and you cannot go on living as before.

I suspect we need a shaper, clearer, crisper understanding of the gospel for the years ahead. We will make mistakes without it. We'll value all the wrong things. We'll begin to elevate the importance of structures and process or we'll begin to ape the opinion shapers in the culture around us. Even in some of our churches in recent years, the gospel occasionally struggles to get a hearing. It is assumed or augmented and our explanations are not disciplined by the Bible as much as we claim they are. I sometimes hear more social commentary than I do biblical text! But confessional Anglicanism does not avoid the language of sin, wrath and judgment. It takes seriously our active responsibility for the sin in our lives. It delights in the provision of Jesus as the only Saviour of the world, by his sin- and wrath-bearing death and his glorious resurrection. Without these same commitments we are confessional Anglicans in name only. Because confessional Anglicanism is all about the biblical gospel.

Put very simply, the further we move away from the priority and urgency of evangelism, the further we are moving away from confessional Anglicanism. To pick up one of Ashley's phrases: it is all about grace and gratitude.

In the time that remains I want to suggest three things we need if confessional Anglicanism, defined in this way, is to have a future other than as a curiosity in a shrinking number of 'museums' around the city and the country. And then I will give a very brief word of testimony at the end.

Three things we'll need for a future

a. Theological clarity

Firstly, if confessing Anglicanism is to have a future in Australia and elsewhere, we will need theological clarity. I've started down this road already this morning, so this first point should not be a surprise to anybody. However, I think it is particularly important given the nature of the moment and the pressure of the moment.

By the *nature* of the moment I mean the external conditions under which we proclaim the gospel. In our city there are huge numbers of people who have no contact at all with the gospel. Many report they do not even know anyone who is a Christian. And there is very little residual biblical literacy left in our culture. Knowledge we may have assumed as a backdrop against which we might speak of the gospel just isn't there in many cases. In such a context we cannot afford confused or equivocating explanations of the heart of the biblical message. We need crystal clarity.

And in talking to each other, we need clarity about why evangelism is such a priority if we are going to persevere in it. If we are going to encourage others to join us in this task in the current climate then we need to show how the gospel mission is not an optional extra. If we are going to live as disciples of Christ, really demonstrate Christ-likeness, then this has to mean, at the very least, that his priorities are ours. And we know the heart of Christ for the lost. Growing like Christ means growing in our concern for the lost. What's more, Paul spoke, in 2 Corinthians 5, of the ministry of reconciliation. But it wasn't simply something he understood as a peculiar responsibility of his, associated perhaps with him being an apostle. Instead, he associated the ministry of reconciliation with the fact of reconciliation: Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5.18).

Growing hostility, especially among the intelligentsia and the opinion makers heightens this need for theological clarity. We need to be able to weigh what we hear against the whole of Scripture. When we stand in a different place or

are heading in a different direction to our culture, we need as far as we are able to explain why and this will require theological clarity. Why is it we cannot give ground on the same-sex marriage issue? We need to think clearly about the God-given purposes of marriage and sex, the nature of the disruption caused by sin, the way in which the gospel makes a difference to the way we treat each other. If we love the people we're talking to and believe that God is calling people from every community to himself — even from the gay and lesbian community — then we cannot simply default to a single proof text, Leviticus 18.22 or the like. Love and compassion requires us to explain why — why God's way of ordering human sexuality is more life sustaining, why the exclusive union of a man and a woman for life is more more nourishing of community than the alternatives. Theological clarity is necessary because of the nature of the moment.

By the *pressure* of the moment I mean the increasing pressure we will be under from within the Christian community, from those in the churches and who bear the name Christian, to shift our commitments. The liberal establishment in America and elsewhere is spending a lot of money trying to persuade Christians in evangelical churches around the world that their commitments are superficial and unwarranted. 'They are just a matter of interpretation and that interpretation resonates with your community for reasons other than it is biblical. You need to allow for more diversity of opinion and not be such a literalist.' To our brothers and sisters in developing countries they say 'You've not been taught the whole gospel. Let us help you to a *mature* faith. We used to believe those things too but now we have "grown up" in the faith.'

There is a great deal of confusion in many churches, and much of it created by others in the churches, about justification by faith, for instance. The new perspective on Paul is only one challenge to the teaching of the Reformers on this issue. Alongside it is an apocalyptic reading of Paul, the new Finnish

interpretation of Luther on the issue and even the results of various ecumenical discussions. We need theological clarity to see where the alternative explanations lead and where they are sourced. We need theological clarity to see what the heart of the Bible's teaching on the subject really is and how the various aspects of the doctrine fit together. What is more, we need theological clarity to see what are the consequences of shifting in our understanding in one direction or another.

The Scriptures warn us to expect an assault on biblical doctrine from within the churches. We ought not to be surprised when we see doctrinal disagreement, even in the churches. But if we are not to just retreat into our bunkers or admit a variety of views in order to maintain an illusory unity, we will need theological clarity. If we are not inadvertently to surrender the gospel and so confessional Anglicanism, we will need theological clarity.

b. Global vision

The second thing we'll need if we are to have a future is global vision. In an age when travel and communication have been made much easier by every new wave of technology, we cannot afford the parochialism that has often characterised us in the past. Our geographical isolation was, in hindsight, a very kind gift of God to us. Our Christian leaders were then less influenced by those overseas than might be the case now. We were to some degree insulated from the ravages of some of the worst liberal theological trends of the past half a century. Yet that era is over. All that has changed and the global village is a reality. Challenges to gospel truth and biblical living can be beamed into our homes almost instantly. It no longer takes years for the strange ideas of some academics to filter down to the churches.

Just as the world can no longer be hidden from us, we cannot hide from the world. We cannot ignore the suffering of our brothers and sisters in many parts of the world. We cannot ignore the pressure applied to them to conform to

the dictates of those who have the money and can provide them with the resources that they need. I was blown away in Jerusalem in 2008, London in 2012 and Nairobi in 2013 by the stories of those who were suffering at the hands of those with power in the Anglican Communion. I was stunned by how many said the problems all started years before in their theological colleges. Here too we cannot avoid the importance of theological clarity. I was left gasping for air as the crippling need of so many pressed heavily on me. Churches throughout Africa and Latin America and Asia pastored by men with less than what we would consider a basic Sunday School training: godly, faithful men and women struggling to make sense of the Bible and so defaulting to the confused spruiking of prosperity preachers. And these were all Anglicans! And then there were those for whom standing with Christ and for biblical faith was not an idle or theoretical decision but literally a matter of life and death. If you don't know the story of the first Ugandan martyrs you need to hear it and realize how much the Western ecclesiastical power brokers just do not understand.

If confessional Anglicanism is to have a future, it needs to embrace the opportunity for global gospel partnerships. We've begun to do that in this diocese over the past ten years. It will be, I suspect, one of the lasting legacies of Peter Jensen's time as archbishop, that he took us into the world. And he took us into the world without compromising who we are. Not that we had done nothing before. Especially through CMS there have been very significant partnerships with Anglicans in other places for decades. But we can no longer afford to say 'Let them go their way; We'll just get on with evangelism and maturing God's people in our own patch.' We are bound to our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who are in need and sorely pressed on all sides.

Which is why GAFCON/FCA is so important. I'm not pretending it's not easy. There are and will be frustrations. Quite frankly, I think next week in

Melbourne, the conference launching FCA Australia, will be a mixed bag. It promises to be very significant indeed, but it won't just be a conference of the entirely like-minded. And as such it will be a particular instance of a larger issue we need to face if we are to be effective in gospel work on a global scale. Global gospel partnerships will mean working alongside people who don't always understand each other and on some things have very different commitments. How do we do that with love and integrity?

A particular challenge the movement poses for us is how to work beside conservative Anglo-Catholics in the Communion and yet remain unambiguously Protestant and Reformed. There is, and there will be, pressure within the movement to smooth over the Reformation distinctives for the sake of greater cooperation in the fight against liberalism in the churches and secularism in the community. We ought to expect that. I suspect that one urgent need of the moment is for sustained, detailed attention to the matter of *adiaphora* — just what are the matters of indifference and what are the matters of principle? What is it that differentiates the two and under what circumstances might a matter of indifference become a matter of principle?

Another question we need to face, not just as we engage on the global stage, but also as we seek to chart a way forward at home, is how might we encourage genuinely indigenous expressions of confessional Anglicanism? What does a thoroughly *Australian* confessional Anglicanism look like? Should there be such a thing? How is it different, at least in form of expression, from confessional Anglicanism elsewhere? Just as important will be asking ourselves how we can be alert to those moments when we are merely baptizing the prejudices and preferences of our national culture? And as we look at ourselves in this way, we need to ask what room must we allow for indigenous expressions of confessional Anglicanism in other places? Not budging a millimetre on the content — the teaching of Scripture, the gospel

— but allowing and indeed celebrating diversity in the way we express it in different settings.

We will need a global vision in the years ahead. We will need to foster a greater awareness among ourselves of the need of our brothers and sisters in other places and of the richness of what they have to offer us. We've already begun but there is so much more to do. And yes, the need and the opportunities are so great and so many it can be overwhelming. We will need to think strategically and prioritize because our own resources are not limitless. But part of putting the gospel first will be putting the need of our brothers and sisters in other places before the preservation of structures and institutions and our own possessions. I want to stand together with people like those faithful men and women in Vancouver and Washington and places in the UK who have surrendered their buildings and all that they have built over the years rather than surrender to the demands of an institution that long ago abandoned the gospel.

c. A critical appreciation of our heritage

The third thing I'm convinced we need as confessional Anglicanism moves forward into the future is a critical appreciation of our heritage. I'm not suggesting for a moment that we need to be antiquarian and that the way forward is to go back and try to recreate the golden age of Anglicanism. I think Cranmer himself would have been shocked that the prayer book he helped to write in the sixteenth century would still be being used *verbatim* in the twentieth, let alone the twenty-first. We do not need to replicate the English forms and ethos of the sixteenth century. Though they sometimes seem appealing over against the vacuousness of so much of what we see around us today. Harking back to some golden age won't solve our problems. In fact there was no golden age when you look into it. Robert Doyle's article in *The Briefing* with that title needs to be read again and

understood, in my opinion. Confessional Anglicanism has always been under attack in one form or another.

What we need is to understand the principles which have always shaped confessional Anglicanism in its various guises — and here Ashley's work has been so helpful, hasn't it? We need to become more familiar with the 39 Articles, the Homilies, the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal and what they were trying to do. We need to hold on to the principles, when and where they're biblical, gospel principles, and do the hard work of finding ways to express those same principles in a very different context. One example might be the commitment of Cranmer and others to *common* prayer, teaching people to pray biblically informed prayers by doing it when we get together — not just listening to the prayers of the priest or his surrogate, but praying together. *Common* prayer is an important part of our Anglican inheritance that we are in danger of losing in many places today as the only prayers that are prayed when we gather are those prayed by others on our behalf. But what is it about common prayer that was so distinctive and important in the sixteenth century? What gospel principles did the practice embody? How do we preserve those particular principles in our own setting?

We have an extraordinary heritage. We don't need to get precious about it or preoccupied with it. But we need to be confident in it. We need to understand who we are and how we came to be who we are, why *these* commitments matter to us and *those* do not. I take it this means we need to learn and re-learn and regularly remind ourselves and each other of the family history: the monumental events and ideas of the Reformation, particularly the English Reformation; the great Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century; the Evangelical resurgence of the twentieth century. In our own setting, we need to make more of the great Australian confessional Anglican legacy from Richard Johnson to John Chapman.

But it needs to be a *critical* appreciation of our heritage. We need to be honest about our mistakes and be willing to learn from them. I would regard various attempts over the centuries to coerce uniformity as monumental mistakes. I can understand why they were attempted. In some cases – though not all – I entirely sympathise with the goals of the exercise. But it was, in my view, entirely the wrong way to go about it. I'm with Luther — surprise, surprise — and his insistence that persuasion rather than coercion is the guiding principle of Christian ministry. Closer to home we need to see the way Australian anti-authoritarianism has driven us more than the gospel at times, even if we've tended to use the gospel to justify it. There is nothing particularly godly or principled about bucking authority and refusing to honour those God has placed in responsibility over you. But at other points we have seen the haunting spectre of institutionalism and denominationalism shaping our decisions rather than the gospel. There need be nothing wrong with denominations, even multiple denominations, in and of themselves. But there is a great deal wrong with denominationalism, where the denomination demands a greater loyalty and obedience than to Christ and to the local gathering of his people where we have regular opportunities for love and service. I seem to remember a provocatively titled, but deeply insightful article by Broughton Knox in the *Australian Church Record* years ago entitled 'The Sin of Denominationalism' — denominations, OK; denominationalism, definitely not. It is surprising how quickly we can slip from one to another without really knowing it.

We need to be prepared to test everything against the standard of God's written word. Luther and Calvin were not infallible. Cranmer wasn't. None of those who have gone before us, no matter how great and no matter how many good things they have done, has been infallible either. Moore College is not infallible. The Jerusalem Declaration is not infallible. The 39 Articles are not infallible. The only utterly truthful, entirely reliable, and thoroughly powerful standard for Christian faith and life is the Bible. It is the good God's

good gift to us and everything needs to be measured against what is taught here. So our heritage must not be absolutized as if it is itself a proper focus for our loyalty and unbreakable obligations to obedience. Our wonderful inheritance as confessional Anglicans — evangelical Anglicans — needs far greater attention than we usually give it. Let's be what we are and be comfortable and confident in being what we are. We are not independent evangelicals in the mode of many of the mega churches of America. We are not the Australian branch of the Southern Baptists or the mid-western Presbyterians. We have our own rich inheritance which we should cherish and not throw away lightly. But that inheritance must be *critically* appreciated against the standard of Scripture — which strangely is something that lies at the very heart of the inheritance itself. So I'm brought back to the point I made right at the beginning: Anglicanism that is true to itself is never first and foremost about Anglicanism, but about the gospel. Confessional Anglicanism is not about structures and offices and canons, or even venerating the memory of great ones from the past — these are all incidental means to an end. And that end is the gospel.

A brief word of testimony

I said I would conclude with a brief word of testimony, very brief. I am an Anglican — not just by historical accident but by conviction. I am convinced that here is a good — more than good, something that has proven to be powerfully effective over almost five hundred years — expression of gospel principles and gospel priorities. I am comfortable with its confessional standards: the 39 Articles, the Homilies, the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal. And I love our heritage. I thank God for Cranmer and Grindall and Whitfield and Simeon and Stott and Packer and Mowll and Loane and Knox and Chappo and the Jensens and so many others. It is so very true that we are pygmies on the back of giants. I'm not saying Anglicanism is perfect. Its flaws are all too apparent. But I'm not hankering to be somewhere else.

Yet to be true to that heritage I must be a gospel man first. We must be gospel people first. And that, as I've said repeatedly, is actually what lies at the heart of confessional Anglicanism. Cranmer made his stand because the gospel was too important to be confused and clouded by the Catholicism of his day. The GAFCON Primates and all who attended the conference in Jerusalem made their stand because the gospel is too important to be compromised by liberal theology and a surrender to pressure of the culture to conform to its standards of behaviour. The future lies following in their footsteps and channelling our resources and our energy into reaching the millions who are lost without Christ just here in our city let alone across the world, and refusing to be distracted by denominational loyalty and structures and all the rest.

None of us are prophets so who knows what the future will actually hold for confessional Anglicanism. But I know that whatever lies ahead, we will need theological clarity, a global vision, and a critical appreciation of all that God has given us as Anglicans.