

# What the Anglican Communion has said about the Bible 2

## Themes and Principles

emerging from official and semi-official  
Anglican Communion documents



## **Introduction**

The thinking of the Anglican Communion over time may be traced through its foundational theologians and documents, Lambeth Conference resolutions, internal reports, and its ecumenical conversations. These are also echoed in other reports and statements. As part of the "Bible in the Life of the Church" project [BILC] we have looked back at these documents, resolutions and reports to see what they have said and are saying to us.

Within the last seventy-five years the Communion has on a number of occasions articulated its understanding of the use of the Bible in the Church. Included in the companion document – *What has the Anglican Communion said about the Bible 1 : Extracts* - are extracts from earlier Anglican foundational statements and affirmations that are restated or find an echo in the later documents. A number of strong themes emerge that represent the 'mind' of the Communion on the place of Scripture in its life.

Part 1 of this paper seeks to identify these themes which provide a summary of what Anglicans believe in relation to Scripture. In this section of the paper the 'we' in each theme refers to Anglicans.

In Part 2 the paper goes on to deduce, from these themes, principles that might guide the way we, as Anglicans, might engage with and interpret Scripture. In this section any references to 'us' or 'we' refer to the Steering Group of the BILC project and represent conclusions they have drawn. They are offered to the wider Communion as a framework for engaging more deeply in conversation about how Scripture is speaking to the Church.

### **Part 1: Themes that emerge**

#### **Theme 1: We accord Scripture a central place in the life of the church.**

Article VI provides the foundation - "Scripture containeth all things necessary for salvation" – restated in the Lambeth Quadrilateral (Resolution 11 from the 1888 Lambeth Conference). This statement is expanded, applied and worked out in many of the later documents. For example, questions asked of ordinands in Anglican Communion ordination liturgies, the Church of England's Declaration of Assent, the reaffirmation of the "primary authority of Scripture" in Section 1.1.3 of the proposed text of the Anglican Covenant – "the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as containing all things necessary for salvation and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith" – and also resolution III.1 at the 1998 Lambeth Conference:

This Conference, recognising the need in our Communion for fuller agreement on how to interpret and apply the message of the Bible in a world of rapid change and widespread cultural interaction,

- a. reaffirms the primary authority of the Scriptures, according to their testimony and supported by our own historic formularies;
- b. urges that the biblical text should be handled respectfully, coherently, and consistently, building upon our best traditions and scholarship believing that the Scriptural revelation must continue to illuminate, challenge and transform cultures, structures, and ways of thinking, especially those that predominate today;
- c. invites our provinces, as we open ourselves afresh to a vision of a Church full of the Word and full of the Spirit, to promote at every level biblical study programmes which can inform and nourish the life of dioceses, congregations, seminaries, communities, and members of all ages.

However, the central place accorded Scripture is not always translated into our engagement with the Bible. The second part of the 1958 Lambeth Conference Resolution 5 calls upon us to

"re-establish the habit of Bible reading." The 1998 Lambeth Conference Resolution III.1(c) also points to this deficit, as does the Windsor Report:

57. This means that for scripture to 'work' as the vehicle of God's authority it is vital that it be read at the heart of worship in a way which (through appropriate lectionaries, and the use of scripture in canticles etc.) allows it to be heard, understood and reflected upon, not as a pleasing and religious background noise, but as God's living and active word. The message of scripture, as a whole and in its several parts, must be preached and taught in all possible and appropriate ways. It is the responsibility of the whole Church to engage with the Bible together; within that, each individual Christian, to the fullest extent of which they are capable, must study it and learn from it, thoughtfully and prayerfully.

Within this context, the Church's accredited leaders have a responsibility, through constant teaching and preaching, to enable the Church to grow to maturity, so that when difficult judgements are required they may be made in full knowledge of the texts.

**Theme 2: We value biblical scholarship while acknowledging that Scripture must also be read within the context of the Church's practice in order for us to hear its fullest meaning.**

The 1958 Lambeth Conference Resolution 4 acknowledged the debt "to the host of devoted scholars who .... have enriched and deepened our understanding of the Bible ... with intellectual integrity .." The 1998 resolution urged that our handling of the text should build upon "our best traditions and scholarship" (III.1(b)). The 2008 Communion, Conflict and Hope report speaks of the Anglican tradition of reading the Bible having a "deep respect for biblical scholarship" (para 65). There is also the recognition that "we read the Bible together, corporately and individually, with a grateful and critical sense of the past, a vigorous engagement with the present, and with patient hope for God's future." (A paper from the Theological Education for the Anglican Communion working party included in Lambeth Conference 2008 Reader).

**Theme 3: We experience the Word of the living God through the words of Scripture as we participate in liturgy and worship.**

As the 1662 Book of Common Prayer articulates in the second Sunday of the Church's year:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience [experience] and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. *Amen.* (BCP 1662 – Collect for Second Sunday of Advent)

It is a longstanding Anglican practice to express our corporate faith within the words of the liturgy: *lex orandi, lex credendi*; which literally means "how pray is we believe." Prayer books throughout the Anglican Communion consistently incorporate language that is drawn directly from Scripture or reflects its witness, and this language forms the vast majority of their content.

**Theme 4: We recognise that the application of Scripture to complex issues requires serious study, and prayer.**

The fourth of the 1958 Lambeth Conference resolutions acknowledges the Anglican Communion's debt to "devoted scholars" as they have "enriched and deepened our understanding of the Bible, not least by facing with intellectual integrity the questions raised by modern knowledge and modern criticism".

The situation facing the Communion when the Windsor Report was written was a complex one. Facing these complexities, it calls for "mature study, wise and prayerful discussion, and a joint commitment to hearing and obeying God as he speaks in scripture, to discovering more of the Jesus Christ to whom all authority is committed, and to being open to the fresh wind of the Spirit who inspired scripture in the first place" (para 61). *Communion, Conflict and Hope* acknowledges the "determinative role of Scripture" but goes on to add "how the Bible is used in determining the outcome of specific controversies is unclear" (para 67)

**Theme 5: We recognise that there is a healthy and necessary diversity of views on the interpretation of Scripture but that such diversity exists within limits.**

*Communion, Conflict and Hope* suggests that "a renewed emphasis on the unity as well as the diversity of Scripture means that listening to the Bible together can be a restorative as well as disturbing experience for the Christian community" (para 68). The Revised Common Lectionary, widely used across the Communion, seeks to provide a diverse interaction with the Scriptures while at the same time ordering and balancing the range of our engagement.

The same report later goes on to say that "any expectation that interpretations of Scripture will ever be totally uncontested is discounted by the experience of history, if not the very character of the Bible itself. Knowledge of God's purposes in Scripture will always be partial in the church, yet it will be sufficient for the patient pursuit of truth and holiness, if there is a corporate willingness to respond to what is understood in particular circumstances." (para 69)

The text of the proposed Covenant in the section on 'Our Unity and Common Life' talks of a commitment "to spend time with openness and patience in matters of theological debate and reflection, to listen, pray and study with one another in order to discern the will of God. Such prayer, study and debate is an essential feature of the life of the Church as it seeks to be led by the Spirit into all truth and to proclaim the gospel afresh in each generation." (para 3.2.3)

**Theme 6: We recognise that both the original contexts in which biblical texts were written and the contemporary cultural contexts in which they are heard are important to the way we read Scripture.**

The preface to the Declaration of Assent states that the Church of England "professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation." The Virginia Report expands what is expressed in the Declaration of Assent when it says, "the characteristic Anglican way of living with a constant dynamic interplay of Scripture, tradition and reason means that the mind of God has constantly to be discerned afresh, not only in every age, but in each and every context." (para 3.11)

The 1986 *For the Sake of the Kingdom* report stated, "If these churches [i.e. those of the Anglican Communion] belong to one another, however, and to a particular tradition within the church universal, they also belong to the places where their life is conducted and their work carried out. Each is set in a particular cultural world, which, although it is not static and continues to grow and be modified by its encounter with other cultures and experiences, has an identifiable style or idiom of its own. These cultural worlds differ - in the traditions and values they live by, in the habits of thought and behaviour they encourage. They differ not only from one another, but also from the world of Christian experience and tradition which is carried by Anglicanism." (para 19)

Communion, Conflict and Hope suggests that "As particular members of the Anglican Communion, we bring our contextual, cultural, and personal situations to bear upon the task of 'reading in communion' with others across space and time." (para 64)

Both the 1986 and 2008 reports express that "Christians in a given place and time both will and must share the cultural idiom of their geographical and social locale. It also means that their life and witness both will and must address the issues, moral and political, with which historical circumstance confronts them in that locale. The church belongs to all its many places and times, and it is in this fact that its legitimate pluriformity is, in the end, rooted." (para 94)

The Covenant speaks of a commitment "to hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Scriptures in our different contexts." (para 1.2.4)

The Anglican Communion Network for Interfaith Concerns (NIFCON) document *Generous Love* suggests that, "our presence in, and engagement with, multi-religious contexts lead us to read the Scriptures in new ways" (chap 3, p 5).

### **Theme 7: We recognise that Scripture 'reads' us as we read the Bible.**

Communion, Conflict and Hope emphasises this theme in particular in Statement 1 in the section on the 'Centrality of the Bible in Anglican Tradition'. It said, "The koinonia of the Anglican Communion is both greatly enriched, and at times challenged and confused, by the variety of ways of encountering Scripture. We bring our whole lives, in our different cultural and personal contexts, to Scripture, and from those places open ourselves to 'being read by' Scripture."

It further expanded this as follows; "Scripture speaks to the whole personality of the reader; the habits of the heart and a culture's heart. Scripture reads us as much as, perhaps even more than, our reading of it, however closely we attempt to understand and interpret its message" (para 70) and "even the most rigorous scrutiny of the text of Scripture must lead towards those moments of transfiguration as Christian disciples realise they are standing and living in the light of God's presence." (para 72)

### **Theme 8: We recognise that we hold a great deal in common on these issues with our ecumenical partners.**

Anglicans have been partners in a number of agreed ecumenical dialogues which have affirmed the centrality of Scripture within the life of the Church. The First Anglican-Lutheran Agreement (Pullach, 1972) asserts that both Churches uphold the "Old and New Testaments as the sufficient, inspired, and authoritative record and witness, prophetic and apostolic, to God's revelation in Jesus Christ." Furthermore, the agreement adds that "nothing should be preached, taught or ordered in the church which contradicts the word of God as it is proclaimed in Holy Scripture." Anglican and Lutherans have confidently stated:

... The whole church, and especially the ministry of the church, has received the responsibility for guarding all proclamation and interpretation from error by guiding, admonishing and judging and by formulating doctrinal statements, the biblical witness always being the final authority and court of appeal...

Similarly, the Moscow agreed statement of the Anglican-Orthodox dialogue (1976) stresses that the "Scriptures constitute a coherent whole ... They bear authoritative witness to God's revelation of himself in creation, in the Incarnation of the Word and in the whole history of salvation, and as such express the Word of God in human language." The report continues: ... The books of Scripture contained in the Canon, are authoritative because they truly convey the authentic revelation of God, which the Church recognises in them. Their authority is not determined by any particular theories concerning the authorship of these books or the historical circumstances in which they were written. The Church gives attention to the results of scholarly research concerning the Bible from whatever quarter they come, but it tests them in the light of its experience and understanding of the faith as a whole...

Anglicans and Roman Catholics have also issued a number of joint agreed statements on the place of Scripture in the life of the Church. In its 1981 elucidation to the agreed statement on Authority, the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) commented that:  
... No endeavour of the Church to express the truth can add to the revelation already given. Moreover, since the Scriptures are the uniquely inspired witness to divine revelation, the Church's expression of that revelation must be tested by its consonance with Scripture. This does not mean simply repeating the words of Scripture, but also both delving into their deeper significance and unravelling their implications for Christian belief and practice...

The 1998 ARCIC agreed statement, *The Gift of Authority*, puts it emphatically: "Word of God and Church of God cannot be put asunder" (para 23).

**Theme 9: We recognise that the dynamic interplay between Scripture, reason and tradition constitutes a classic Anglican way of viewing and approaching Scripture.**

Anglicans have sought to hold together Scripture, tradition and reason together. This is perhaps most clearly articulated in the insistence on holding together, however demanding, the various statements of the 1958 Lambeth Conference Resolutions: it is "the Church (that is) both guardian and interpreter of Holy Scripture"(Res 3); that "we acknowledge our debt to the host of devoted scholars" (Res 4); that we put great emphasis on "Bible study within the common life of the Church" (Res 5); that we value "the dominant place which the Anglican Communion has always given to the Holy Scriptures in all its public worship" (Res 6); that we recognise "the importance of preaching, both evangelistic and expository" (Res 7); that we acknowledge "gratefully the work of scientists in increasing [our] knowledge of the universe (Res 8); and that we urge "Christian scholars and leaders to co-operate with [scientists]and other kinds of modern learning in the study of their respective modes of thought and speech (Res 9).

This multi-faceted view of how we, as Anglicans, view Scripture is also summed up in the "Formed by Scripture" section of *The Anglican Way: Signposts for a Common Journey* (2007).

**Theme 10: We recognise that every generation has to approach anew the task of engaging with and interpreting Scripture.**

The 1958 Lambeth Conference Resolution 12 calls for "a special effort ..... to extend the scope and deepen the quality of personal and corporate study of the Bible." The fullest statement comes from The Windsor Report which suggests that "each individual Christian, to the fullest extent of which they are capable, must study it and learn from it, thoughtfully and prayerfully." (para 57) The Windsor Report comments at greatest length on how this is to be done:

... questions of interpretation are rightly raised ... as a way of ensuring that it really is scripture that is being heard, not simply the echo of our own voices (though our own responsive hearing is necessary) or the memory of earlier Christian interpretations (though we must always take them into account: 'tradition' consists primarily of the recollection of what the scripture-reading Church has said). Historical interpretation, from ongoing lexicographical work (to make sure the nuances of ancient words are properly and precisely heard) to large-scale historical reconstruction (to ensure we are not making anachronistic assumptions), remains vital. It can be deeply challenging to entrenched views of what scripture is thought to be saying, not least where it has been read within an unchallenged philosophical or cultural matrix.  
... the current crisis thus constitutes a call to the whole Anglican Communion to re-evaluate the ways in which we have read, heard, studied and digested scripture. We can no longer be content to drop random texts into arguments, imagining that the point is thereby proved, or indeed to sweep away sections of the New Testament as irrelevant to today's world, imagining that problems

are thereby solved. We need mature study, wise and prayerful discussion, and a joint commitment to hearing and obeying God as he speaks in scripture, to discovering more of the Jesus Christ to whom all authority is committed, and to being open to the fresh wind of the Spirit who inspired scripture in the first place ....

The 1998 Lambeth Resolution III.1(b), echoed in the proposed Covenant (1.2.5), "urges that the biblical text should be handled respectfully, coherently, and consistently, building upon our best traditions and scholarship believing that the Scriptural revelation must continue to illuminate, challenge and transform cultures, structures, and ways of thinking, especially those that predominate today."

The Resolution goes on to invite provinces "to promote at every level biblical study programmes." (III.1(c)). Communion, Conflict and Hope also suggested that "... methods of cross-cultural and trans-generational reading of the Bible are to be encouraged." (para 69).

The paragraph above from the Windsor Report [59] is one of the few places in these documents where the 'how?' of this engaging and interpreting of Scripture is attempted. The findings of the BILC project suggest that this is a key area where further work is needed.

***So if we are to engage with Scripture, as Anglicans, mindful of all that the Church has learned, are there principles we can follow in this process? How do we seek to listen to what Scripture says?***

***The Bible in the Life of the Church project derived the following principles from the above themes, regional research of current Anglican practice and contemporary Anglican hermeneutical insights. The regions involved were, East Africa, Southern Africa, South East Asia, Britain, Latin America, North America, Oceania and South Sudan.***

## **Part 2: Principles they might lead to**

### **Principle 1: Christ is the living Word of God.**

For Christians, every dimension of the Bible in some way points to the living person of Jesus who is the Christ, and to the unlimited, liberating love of God, which is revealed in Christ the Word. As *The Windsor Report* makes clear in its Hermeneutics section (Section B, Scripture and Interpretation), it is not the words of the Bible that are "the way, the truth and the life"; it is the person of Christ the Word of God, to whom the Bible witnesses. It is in this sense that the Bible is the 'Word of God'. This means that any adequate interpretation of a biblical text must discern in it the light of God's will to redeem all humanity in Christ the Word, to go to any lengths to do so, and finally to accomplish what God intends. Christ is the living Word of God to whom the written words bear witness.

The Christian insight is that "God is love" (1 John 4:16) and that God's love knows no limits ("neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord", Romans 8:39). The Bible reveals that the love of God in Jesus is the culminating point of its teaching and therefore gives us a uniquely Christian hermeneutic. As the *Generous Love* document of 2008 says,

... The Bible has primacy in Anglican theological method, in that we seek to be a community living in obedience to Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God who is revealed through the words of Holy Scripture. In identifying the message of the Bible for the present, the Anglican method brings the insights of tradition and reason to the interpretation of the text in the light of experience ...

The Bible as the revelation of the Love of God in Jesus Christ expresses this love in terms of righteousness and justice.

**Principle 2: The Old Testament is the foundational part of Christian Scripture, its First Testament.**

The books of the Bible are hugely different in time, culture, genre, place and perspective. The plurality of the Scriptures demonstrates an unfolding revelation of God. The cumulative witness of the Old Testament reveals the character of God and of the faithful life of God's people and in multiple parts points toward Christ. We understand who Christ is in light of the Old Testament and we read the Old Testament in the light of Christ. Article VII makes this fundamental point: "The Old Testament is not contrary to the New: for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and Man, being both God and Man. Wherefore they are not to be heard, which feign that the old Fathers did look only for transitory promises."

**Principle 3: The Bible is to be taken as a whole and has within it great depths of spiritual meaning.**

It is the responsibility of the Church to explore the multiple meanings of Scripture. In Exodus 14, the account of the escape of the Israelites from the Egyptians can be read as history. Within the story there is also a moral principle. It calls for the liberation of enslaved peoples and thanksgiving for God's liberating acts. For Christians it points forward to the liberating death of Jesus on the cross which Luke (9:31) describes as his 'exodos' ('way out'). That is at least one aspect of its future fulfilment. The exodus has a spiritual meaning also. It calls us to leave the world of oppression, greed and enslavement, in order to follow the call of God, even when that means venturing forth in hope into an unknown destiny.

Similarly, when reading any passage of the Bible we must consider all relevant biblical material and not take passages in isolation and out of context. Mark 13, for example, speaks about the coming of Christ in the future against the background of the prophetic heritage of symbolic speaking. We can see that those symbols refer not only to an eschatological reality but also to the religious and political context of Israel, the hostile environment of Roman Palestine. In both respects they call us to lead lives of ethical responsibility and hope. The Bible is greater than the sum of its parts and taking it as a whole deepens our understanding of its different parts.

**Principle 4: There are many different literary genres in the Bible, which are to be distinguished carefully and consistently.**

It is irresponsible and dangerous to interpret texts without attentiveness to literary genre. For example, Jesus' injunction to pluck out your own eye (Matt 5:29) if read without recognition of the metaphor is contrary to his actual meaning, that we are to view others accurately and responsibly. While also, Scripture challenges us in many places to address injustice, poverty and oppression with the justice and compassion of God. This is not a metaphor, it is a literal calling.

Another example would be that much of the poetry in Scripture is not so much about 'teaching' but given to us for inspiration or reflection encouraging us to read Scripture devotionally and mystically.

**Principle 5: An accurate reading of the Bible is informed, not threatened, by sound scientific understanding: the God who inspires Scripture as a true witness is the same God who created the world.**

We see the word of God written in Scripture as a special revelation (John 14:16; John 14:26) pointing to Jesus Christ, the living Word. We also see a general revelation over time (John



16:12-13) in the life of the world around us, even though the world is marred. God's truth is the same in the Bible and all through the world that God has made.

Richard Hooker in Ecclesiastical Laws Book II wrote, "But admit this, and mark, I beseech you, what would follow. God in delivering Scripture to his Church should clean have abrogated amongst them the law of nature; which is an infallible knowledge imprinted in the minds of all the children of men, whereby both general principles for directing of human actions are comprehended, and conclusions derived from them; upon which conclusions groweth in particularity the choice of good and evil in the daily affairs of this life. Admit this, and what shall the Scripture be but a snare and a torment to weak consciences, filling them with infinite perplexities, scrupulosities, doubts insoluble, and extreme despairs?" viii.6. Jonathan Edwards, an eighteenth-century theologian, identified true knowledge as "the consistency and agreement of our ideas with the ideas of God...All the arts and sciences, the more they are perfected, the more they issue in divinity, and coincide with it, and appear to be part of it."

For many centuries Christians typically believed with much of the rest of the world that the earth was flat. With the introduction of more advanced astronomy and exploration we discovered the world is a globe floating in what appears to be an expanding universe which has existed for billions of years.

This kind of understanding deepens our insight into the revelation of Scripture itself. For instance, our respectful reading of Genesis can be greatly enhanced by drawing on the findings of science, particularly relating to the origin and development of life and the ongoing interdependence of all creatures.

**Principle 6: The Bible must be seen in the contexts of the world in which it was written and also brought into conversation or confrontation with our worlds in order to discern God's will for us today.**

We each read the Bible in a community of interest and in a particular context. At the same time the Holy Spirit is given to the Church for all times to lead it into all truth. Often this involves a prophetic challenge and confrontation. As we sought to engage within the Bible in the Life of the Church project important contemporary issues facing Anglicans emerged including economic injustice, ecological degradation and the social disenfranchisement of women. A number of passages explored within the project were far from straightforward in the way they addressed these issues. They are all issues that Scriptural texts speak to in challenging ways with which we as a community of faith are called to wrestle.

God is active in history, and God's way of saving grace, through Christ crucified and risen, is an ongoing pilgrimage of hope: "your Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven." The Bible reveals the truth about our journey and the power of the Spirit guides us as we deepen our understanding and let it transform our lives over time.

**Finally, a concluding Principle 7: We listen to the Scriptures with open hearts and attentive minds accepting their authority for our lives and expecting that we will be transformed and renewed by the continuing work of the Holy Spirit.**

The document, *The Anglican Way: Signposts on a Common Journey*, produced by the Theological Education for the Anglican Communion working party, states:

... In our proclamation and witness to the Word Incarnate we value the tradition of scholarly engagement with the Scriptures from earliest centuries to the present day. We desire to be a true learning community as we live out our faith, looking to one another for wisdom, strength and hope on our journey. We constantly discover that new situations call for fresh expressions of a scripturally informed faith and spiritual life ...

As a paradigm for the way in which the Church wrestles with its Scriptures and tradition we would commend the deliberations of the Council of Jerusalem which in Acts 15 concludes: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28)

In the long-suffering grace of God we believe that God can reveal what we need for our salvation even with our imperfections and limited understanding. This does not depend only on our work of interpretation of the Bible, but on the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit inspiring the people of God in each generation.