



Gaping Gaps? Implications of the 'Bible in the Life of the Church' Project for Bridging the Anglican Hermeneutic Divide

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the 'hermeneutical gaps' identified in a recent and ongoing investigation across the Anglican Communion into the way the Bible is read within worldwide Anglicanism. This investigation is of contemporary importance to the Anglican Communion as the Project's findings were recently presented to the 15th Anglican Consultative Council in October 2012. The 'hermeneutical gaps' which have been identified shed important insights into the strained fellowship which currently seems characteristic of the Communion. The approach of this paper is to evaluate whether these 'gaps' are symptomatic of an inevitable fracturing within the Communion or whether points of apparent disconnect in the use of the Bible are able to be bridged, held together or reconciled for the benefit of Anglicanism's common life.

KEYWORDS: ACC, Anglican, Bible, Communion, gaps, hermeneutics

Introduction

The recent and public image of worldwide Anglicanism, largely depicted by the international media and through the vanguard of online blogs and instant internet publications, has been characterized by debate, disagreement and conflict. Within the Communion, however, internal tensions have prompted Anglicans to re-evaluate how they engage with and use Scripture not as a tool for polemics but

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as a unifying discipline.² The 'Bible in the Life of the Church' project is a recent initiative commissioned by the Anglican Consultative Council at their 2009 meeting in Jamaica (ACC 14) which has sought to evaluate not simply how the Bible has been read in the Anglican tradition but explore how it is currently being used in prayer, study and worship across the Communion.

What has emerged from the project's enquiry is that there are a number of 'hermeneutical gaps', or disconnects, in the way the Bible is being read across the Communion. Five 'gaps' were identified at the halfway point of the Project's implementation and were later confirmed through the Project's second phase.³ It is important to note that the term 'hermeneutical gap' is used loosely by the Project and does not correspond identically with its more narrow application in hermeneutics to the gap between the world of text and reader. In this sense the 'gaps' might more appropriately be read as differences in understanding of the hermeneutical task.⁴ However, I have retained the language of 'gaps' as it is faithful to the Project and speaks directly to its findings. This paper will explore the nature of these five gaps as well as their implications for the Anglican Communion as it struggles to reconcile difference and disagreement within itself.

The implications of these hermeneutical gaps for Anglicanism will be specifically analysed against Anglican self-identification as a 'communion' and the extent to which they represent a threat and challenge. The concept of communion within Anglicanism involves not simply an institutional and organizational reality but also certain theological and ecclesiological assertions concerning its relational existence as a community united in and as Christ's body. These dimensions of communion within Anglicanism will be further unpacked in order to evaluate the impact of the 'hermeneutical gaps' against both of these aspects of Anglican communion.

Background and Approach

The Bible in the Life of the Church project draws its mandate from the 2004 Windsor Report's observation that 'the current crisis thus constitutes a call to the whole Anglican Communion to re-evaluate

2. The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *The Windsor Report* (London: The Anglican Communion Office, 2004), §§ 61–62.

3. S. Lyon, 'Mind the Gap! Reflections on the "Bible in the Life of the Church" Project', *Anglican Theological Review* 93.3 (2011), pp. 451–64.

4. For this clarification I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer.

the ways in which we have read, heard, studied and digested scripture'.⁵ This mandate recognizes that Scripture is never read in a vacuum, but that our patterns of reading are profoundly affected by how others, in particular contexts and traditions with which we might identify, have read and engaged with Scripture.

The project is structured into representative regional groups from Oceania, Southern Africa, East Africa, Britain, North America and South East Asia. Within these regional groups a common pattern of biblical engagement was conducted which focused on the fourth and fifth Anglican Marks of Mission.⁶ Smaller 'User Groups' based in Cuba, other parts of Latin America and South Sudan have also been involved in providing input together with a provincial wide project in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. Working over a period of three years, the project's Steering Group met finally in May 2012 in preparation to report back to ACC 15 and the wider Communion at the end of the year. Each of the regional groups have undertaken a series of Bible studies to discern how Anglicans are engaging with Scripture and preliminary reports have been made by the regional representatives on how texts were handled, examples of methodologies and emerging hermeneutical principles and themes.⁷ Reflection is both objective (undertaken by an outsider) and self-reflective, and the project gives guidelines to aid this process.

Five 'hermeneutical gaps' were identified in the May 2011 report for the 'Principals' Conference' at the International Study Centre, Canterbury.⁸ These will be explored individually with particular attention to the extent to which they may reflect more systemic gaps within the life of the Communion. Tensions within the Anglican Communion are not simply the result of competing hermeneutical approaches. However, explicit analysis of the way in which the

5. The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *Windsor Report*, § 61.

6. 'To seek to transform unjust structures of society' and 'to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth'. The Five Marks of Mission were developed by the Anglican Consultative Council between 1984 and 1990.

7. Although the content of these Bible studies was common, their implementation differed according to context. The project allows for and encourages this flexibility.

8. The Principal's Conference at the International Study Centre, Canterbury, was an initiative of the Theological Education in the Anglican Communion Steering Group gathering together principals and deans of theological colleges from across the Communion.

Bible is used across the Communion offers an insight into key causes of stress and misunderstanding.

This article is particularly informed by the reports produced by each of the project's regional representatives, offering immediate reflections on the outcomes of the experience in their own context. In May 2012 I was privileged to be invited to participate in the final Steering Group meeting held in Woking, England. At this meeting I was given the opportunity to present a draft of this paper to the regional representatives and the feedback, conversations and interactions from that fruitful dialogue have further informed my reflections.

Anglicanism as a 'Communion'

This study is concerned not simply with the implications of the 'hermeneutical gaps' for the existing institutional structures of the Anglican Communion, but also for the quality of that communion as a relational and theological reality.

An international family of churches rooted in the tradition of the Church of England developed through mission (as in Angola), British colonial expansion (as in Mauritius) and a combination of other circumstances.⁹ Significantly, the ramifications of the American Revolution led to the formation of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America independent of the Church of England and drawing on the liturgical traditions of both England and the disestablished Scottish Episcopal Church.¹⁰

Throughout the twentieth century this dynamic evolves as various Anglican provinces and national churches mature, asserting their own distinctiveness within their differing contexts and shifting the centre of gravity within Anglicanism away from the Church of England.¹¹ Building on the foundations of the nineteenth-century

9. This is not intended to be a comprehensive account of the development of global Anglicanism. For further detail refer to, among others, B. Kaye, *An Introduction to World Anglicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); K. Ward, *A History of Global Anglicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); A. Wingate, K. Ward, C. Pemberton, and W. Sitshebo (eds.), *Anglicanism: A Global Communion* (London: Mowbray, 1998).

10. K. Ward, 'The Development of Anglicanism as a Global Communion', in A. Wingate, K. Ward, C. Pemberton and W. Sitshebo (eds.), *Anglicanism: A Global Communion* (London: Mowbray, 1998), p. 15.

11. M. Oxbrow, 'Anglicans and Reconciling Mission: An Assessment of Two Anglican International Gatherings', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 33.1 (2009), pp. 8-10 (10).

Lambeth Conferences, relations between the various Anglican Provinces came to be expressed after the Second World War in terms of 'mutual responsibility and interdependence'.¹²

The development of worldwide Anglicanism illustrates a number of key elements concerning the nature of its communion against which each of the 'hermeneutical gaps' may be tested. The spread of Anglicanism largely through colonial rule raises questions of appropriate power dynamics in a communion. Intrinsic to this dynamic is an awareness of how the 'other' is both respected and edified. Self-awareness and critical reflection encourage and facilitate the sharing and valuing of diverse experiences across diverse contexts. Related to this concern is the rightful place and proper practice of shared discernment within the Communion's common life.

Similarly, the missionary spread of Anglicanism brings into focus the missional nature of communion itself. Social doctrines of the Trinity make much of the 'dancing circle of self-giving and mutually indwelling divine persons'¹³ as a blueprint for ecclesial communion. However, they are impoverished if they fail to give equal attention to the *missio trinitatis*: whereby the Son is sent by the Father, and the Spirit through the Son, into the world to effect the transformational incorporation of all people into relationship with God through the instrument of the Church.¹⁴ Mission, therefore, is an essential element of communion.¹⁵

12. The origin of this important phrase comes from Bishop Stephen Bayne's call to a renewal of missionary awareness across the Communion in the early 1960s, stemming from his role as the Executive Officer to both the Lambeth Consultative Body and the Advisory Council on Missionary Strategy which was an important forerunner to the establishment of the Anglican Consultative Council in 1968. See particularly his seminal report published as S. Bayne, and Advisory Council on Missionary Strategy, *Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence in the Body of Christ: With Related Background Documents* (London: SPCK, 1963).

13. M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 128.

14. D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 390.

15. Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, *The Virginia Report* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1999), 2.16–2.26. The Virginia Report draws particularly on the work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission in relating communion and mission, that is, the Commission's insistence that '[Ecclesial Communion] necessarily finds expression in shared commitment to the mission entrusted by Christ to his Church'. See Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Church as Communion* (Dublin: Anglican Communion Office, 1990), para. 45.

The nature of this communion is also corporate. Incorporation into the 'Body of Christ' means to be 'grafted in' to a sharing of the inheritance which is rooted in God's promise to God's people, calling them out of slavery and into freedom (Rom. 11.17). It is through incorporation into and unity with Christ that this is effected (Rom. 6). This participation in Christ 'has its source in the Triune God himself' through whom we 'are committed to full participation in his redeeming mission'.¹⁶ Communion, therefore, involves participation in a greater corporate narrative which has as its goal the transformation of estrangement into relationship which is the eschatological hope of redemption.

Communion, then, within the Anglican tradition is missional and corporate with an emphasis on shared discernment, awareness and respect of the 'other' and with a sensitivity to the implicit and explicit dynamics of power. The gaps identified by the Bible in the Life of the Church project may be analysed according to these central elements of Anglicanism to determine whether they are necessarily detrimental to its communion.

Gap between 'Fruits of Study' and Hermeneutical Methods

The Bible in the Life of the Church project has revealed a key disconnect between our understanding of biblical texts and the processes and methods of our interpretation. It characterizes this gap as one between the 'academy' and the 'pew'. This disconnect between the 'fruits of study' and the hermeneutical tools employed in their discernment was also present, in some cases, within the academy where the pedagogical approach between professor and students was described by the Principal of a Sudanese training institute as to 'pour out information like water into empty cups'.¹⁷ If such a gap exists within the 'academy' it is hardly surprising that it might then be replicated in the context of mission and ministry where those who employ hermeneutical tools in preaching and teaching 'forget or do not feel the need consciously to explain them to those in the pew'.¹⁸ The project identifies the problematic potential of an Anglican hermeneutic which lacks critical self-awareness and reflection.¹⁹

16. P. Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission* (London: T & T Clark International, 2005), p. 5.

17. E. Davis, *'The Bible and the Environment': A Leadership Seminar for Theological Educators in the Episcopal Church of Sudan* (Juba, Sudan, 2010), p. 1.

18. Lyon, 'Mind the Gap!', p. 459.

19. C. Rowland, 'Reception History', in P. Gooder (ed.), *Searching for Meaning: An Introduction to Interpreting the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 2009), p. 113.

Particularly important is awareness of those influences which shape hermeneutical methods and their outcomes, as these may have far-reaching implications in practice. Three broad sets of influences can be identified from the Bible in the Life of the Church project: the impact of accepted hermeneutical tools; the extant power dynamic between facilitators and participants in scriptural encounter; and often tacit and latent assumptions about authority which underlie global politics.

The first of these influences, the impact of hermeneutical tools, highlights a disconnect between understandings of Scripture and the hermeneutical tools used to discern these understandings. The result of this disconnect leaves Anglicans ill-equipped to evaluate the various factors influencing the fruits of interpretation. Such factors include church experience, interaction and engagement with other cultures, community life and educational experience. The Anglican approach to Scripture certainly uses and values the tools of critical hermeneutics, such as commentaries, study bibles, concordances, lexica and other cultural and historical references.²⁰ These are not in themselves in any way distinctively Anglican, allowing for a breadth in theological and ecumenical conversation.²¹ Nevertheless, these tools are not 'neutral' in the interpretative process and may project their own biases and theological perspectives and prejudices.

The impact of these perspectives and prejudices may be inferred from the report of the British Region:

The way the groups read reflected their particular constituency. A group from one church known for its interest in social justice and political matters read together in that light ... [Another] group seemed to want to find answers from the text that would sit within their particular theological constituency, whilst a group with a particularly strong academic background consequently brought a more 'academic' ... engagement to the text.²²

It is notable that even this reflection itself reveals some evidence of the gap. Academic engagement is understood as distinct from engagement within either a social, political or theological paradigm. While one approach is clearly given no preference, the gap between the 'academy' and 'pew' is evident.

20. The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *Windsor Report*, § 60.

21. C.M. Roark, 'Hermeneutical Tools and their Use', *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 35.3 (1993), p. 5.

22. British Regional Group, *Report for Bible in the Life of the Church Meeting* (Durban, 2010), p. 2.

Alternatively, the Cuba User Group exhibited a hermeneutical approach which was inextricably linked to the worshipping life of the community and identified the Bible as part of a living witness, or 'tapestry', of experiences.²³ The hermeneutical focus of the Cuba User Group was not on the interpretation of the Bible, but rather how it interpreted the life of the community in the context of worship.²⁴ This User Group was drawn from members of the community of *San Felipe Diacono* – a small and very poor Episcopal community consisting almost entirely of women, many of them from African origin, with deep roots in the Anglican tradition. In stark contrast a user group from the Evangelical Seminary of Matanzas, consisting of students and academics, demonstrated an 'over-critical and demanding' hermeneutic which was suspicious of more popular readings.²⁵

An uncritical approach also exposes the 'fruits of study' to a problematic and implicit power dynamic: a similar study of the use of Scripture within a South African context identified that the facilitator's 'whiteness and maleness' had an implicit power influence on the group.²⁶ This influence is evident where the facilitator is himself looked to as a hermeneutical tool and privileged over what else might otherwise have been a fruit of the hermeneutical method within that given context. An awareness of the influence of those with whom we read the Bible is critical not just for self-reflective practice but also for purposeful engagement with alternative perspectives and contexts.²⁷ The North American report reflected a diversity of perspectives, with a notable and significant contribution from the perspective of First Nation people who similarly showed a commitment to encountering Scripture predominantly through the medium of worship and 'believed that God is present when you engage the text, God is actively involved and speaks when the community engages with the text'.²⁸ This distinctive contribution from an indigenous perspective acknowledges and critically evaluates Western 'Bible Study' methods

23. Cuba User Group, *Report for Bible in the Life of the Church Meeting* (Durban, 2010).

24. Cuba User Group, *Report*, 2010.

25. Cuba User Group, *Report for Bible in the Life of the Church Meeting* (Woking, 2012), p. 4.

26. G.O. West, *The Academy of the Poor* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p. 26.

27. West, *The Academy of the Poor*, p. 32.

28. North America Regional Group, *Report for Bible in the Life of the Church Meeting* (Durban, 2010), p. 5.

which may themselves be 'a detriment to people's capacity to see sacred truth and divine presence in Scripture, as we have been educated out of believing that God is present and speaks to God's people. We need not a method but an attitude.'²⁹

The final implication of this gap between hermeneutical methods and their fruits is the potential in an international context for the exploitation of unjust power dynamics. This may be conceptualized through the lens of 'postcolonial theory' which offers a critical analysis of global systems in which 'the voice of the "other" is silenced' and extends liberation theology's critique of unjust and oppressive economic structures to the political sphere.³⁰ It provides a valuable critique of a triangular hermeneutical system in which the Bible provides the text, Western theology and tradition gives interpretation and the rest of the world receives or follows, at best finding application within their own contexts.³¹ Such an explicitly deductive model of global hermeneutics identifies an oppressive and paternalistic methodology which is not simply problematic but dangerous.³²

This gap at best attempts to preserve the distinctiveness and integrity of various approaches to Scripture as well as the diversity of their interpretative fruits, but fails to relate them or to reflect a self-awareness which enables dialogue across these same gaps. Communion cannot be realized where hermeneutical methods, influenced by a diversity of factors, are not related to outcomes. As they cannot be discerned together they can only be imposed, introducing a foreign and destructive power dynamic which obstructs the sharing and valuing of diversity and the edification of the other.

Gap between Scriptural Engagement with Some Issues and Not Others

The reading of Scripture is bound up with the Church's approaches and responses to particular issues within certain contexts. The Bible in the Life of the Church project suggests that there is a gap between 'those issues or topics where the Church gained understanding from Scripture and those where it relied more heavily (possibly exclusively)

29. North America Regional Group, *Report*.

30. L.S. Rukundwa, 'Postcolonial Theory as a Hermeneutical Tool for Biblical Teaching', *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 64.1 (2008), pp. 339–51 (343).

31. Rukundwa, 'Postcolonial Theory', p. 345.

32. A. Thiselton, 'Biblical Studies and Theoretical Hermeneutics', in J. Barton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 108.

on other sources'.³³ Not only is this gap apparent across various issues, but also seems to be reflected across different geographical, socio-economic, cultural and theological contexts.

This was observed particularly from the Australian reflection on scriptural engagement with environmental and ecological issues identified in the first Case Study of the project which itself focused on environmental and ecological justice.³⁴ Environmental issues have been prominent in the Australian context and this is reflected in a number of initiatives and responses of Australian Anglicans.

The Anglican Church of Australia's Environmental Working Group produced a comprehensive document, *Green by Grace*, establishing a theological basis for Christian environmental policy. The group's theological reflection centred on New Testament perspectives of graceful participation in God's purpose and response to God's call, founded on the premise that God's promise of redemption extends to the environment as well as humanity. The document, however, is not widely known and does not make extensive use of biblical texts beyond citations of support from Genesis 1 and Romans 8.³⁵

It is evident that the deliberate use of Scripture in theological reflection and engagement with ecological and environmental issues was limited in the Australian context. This can perhaps be traced to a sense of complacency that 'the science is settled ... the theology is settled ... the morality is settled', and that the 'very success of awakening Anglican Christian awareness to ecological concerns has thus perhaps taken the edge off actual use of the scriptures in relation to this issue'.³⁶

In contrast to the Australian experience, the East African Reference Group described the Case Study 1 workshop as a 'landmark event',

33. Lyon, 'Mind the Gap!', p. 459.

34. For further research on how the Bible is used in relation to environmental and ecological concerns refer to the 'Uses of the Bible in Environmental Ethics' project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council at the University of Exeter. Publications include: D.G. Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical, Ecological Biblical Theology* (London: Equinox, 2010); D.G. Horrell, C. Hunt, C. Southgate and F. Stavrakopoulou (eds.), *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives* (London: T & T Clark, 2010).

35. The document is available at General Synod Environment Working Group of the Anglican Church of Australia, 'Green by Grace (2004)', http://www.environment.perth.anglican.org/documents/WG-Environment_Greenby%20Grace_.pdf (accessed 19 February 2012).

36. Australia Regional Group, *Report for Bible in the Life of the Church Meeting* (Durban, 2010), p. 4.

the 'first of its kind to critically look at the ways in which the church had used the bible', with regard to the Fifth Mark of Mission.³⁷ In this context environmental concerns had not previously been a motivating influence for theological enquiry and mission was understood primarily in terms of evangelisation.³⁸ Deliberate and explicit encounter with Scripture was able to relate ecological and environmental concerns with a primary emphasis on 'saving souls':

The point which the majority of the texts brought home is that God's creation, which includes human being, is mutually dependent on each other ... Indeed the redemption and survival of human beings depends on the redemption of creation as Romans 8: 18-23 seems to imply. It would be erroneous to think that redemption only belongs to human beings since it is not just believers who will be delivered from corruption (1 Cor. 15: 42, 50) but also the non-human creation. Almost all texts that were discussed seemed to agree with the Pauline view in Romans 8: 18-23 that the creation must be redeemed so that humanity may have a fitting environment.³⁹

While the use of the Bible in this context seems primarily concerned with relating soteriology and eschatology with ecology, more general principles in support of environmental care and sustainability were grounded in inspiration drawn from East African 'primal religion and worldview'.⁴⁰ Anglicans do not simply engage with Scripture selectively according to issues and topics, but also according to their differing contexts.

Inherent in this gap is a tension between what Brueggemann describes as the joint task of 'discovering' and 'assigning' a voice within the text, thereby 'making' and 'finding' meaning.⁴¹ In the Australian context meaning was discovered in texts which dealt explicitly with the stewardship of creation and appropriately assigned a voice on these issues. In East Africa, however, meaning within the text was found by discerning a voice that could relate environmental and soteriological concerns. This discovery, within the context of that

37. East Africa Regional Group, *Report for Bible in the Life of the Church Meeting* (Durban, 2010), p. 2.

38. This emphasis on evangelism was also identified within some parts of Australia as the dominant missionary mindset. See Australia Regional Group, *Report*, p. 4.

39. East Africa Regional Group, *Report*, p. 3.

40. East Africa Regional Group, *Report*, p. 4.

41. W. Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality: What We Do When We Read the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 2009), p. 13.

reading community, could offer new and renewed insight into God's purpose for creation and its missionary imperative. The interpretation of Scripture into diverse cultures is always necessary, but is never objective and is mediated by that context. The corporate reading of Scripture is essential to balancing the challenge and call of Scripture with the particular concerns and questions of any given context. The attempt to hold together these two hermeneutical perspectives ultimately renders all interpretation as 'provisional and penultimate'.⁴² If this tension cannot be held, and the gap exacerbated, it may well prove detrimental to Anglican communion. If the purpose of communion, existing together in and as Christ's body, is to await, anticipate and prepare for the transformation of resurrection into new creation then it is a state which is necessarily both penultimate and provisional.⁴³ In the process of both making and finding meaning, communion is compromised when we engage Scripture with some issues and not with others and when we cut Scripture off from dialogue with other sources of insight.

*Gap between Engagement with Particular Passages of Scripture and
Setting Passages within Larger Biblical Context*

The project has also identified a gap between Anglican engagement with particular passages of Scripture and the setting of those passages within their larger biblical context. Within the regional reports there was a general willingness to put texts into conversation with personal events and experiences. This was noted explicitly in the UK context where 'readers were reluctant to put the text with which they were working into conversation with other biblical texts'.⁴⁴ The report from East Africa did show a more explicit attempt to relate different 'key texts', particularly Rom. 8.18–23; 1 Cor. 15.42, 50 and Jn 3.16–17, but even here the texts seemed to be employed in the report as evidence of 'biblical proofs' rather than a dialogue.⁴⁵

The liturgical expression of the Cuba User Group demonstrated an awareness of the inter-connectedness of the biblical narrative. Their practice was that each participant would bring a text which spoke meaningfully to their own experience and these texts were

42. Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality*, p. 15.

43. World Council of Churches – Commission on Faith and Order, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1998), para. 30.

44. British Regional Group, *Report*, p. 2.

45. East Africa Regional Group, *Report*, p. 3.

represented liturgically by small patches of material which were physically joined together, or quilted, and the analogy made concrete with the Bible as a grand narrative of 'the faith of a people, their walking in dialogue and relation with God, their interpretation of the events of their lives and history to the light of faith and spirituality'.⁴⁶ However, even within this liturgical expression of scriptural connectedness there is little suggestion that texts were actively put into conversation with each other.

The North American report made the observation that 'it's difficult to defend the 5th Mark of Mission from Scripture if you're looking for a proof-text rather than the grand-narrative'.⁴⁷ It was noted that proof-texting was not confined to any particular theological or ecclesial group within the Church but that both liberals and conservatives display a tendency and preference to 'reduce the text to a single univocal meaning'.⁴⁸ The report offers some insight as to why this might be the case, identifying a context of widespread biblical illiteracy as the underlying cause of a loss of awareness of, and inability to appreciate, the Scriptural 'grand narrative'.⁴⁹

There is some justification, however, in revising this widespread dismissal of the use of 'proof-texts'. Scripture may indeed speak directly and definitively to certain issues in explicit texts and these texts might rightly be given preference in the Church's discernment of its teaching and practice.⁵⁰ Hermeneutical inquiry is impoverished without an acknowledgment of the particularity of certain texts within the wider biblical narrative, and it is of course the task of every Christian to engage explicitly with the words of Scripture. This call for explicit engagement with texts carries with it, however, a responsibility to be attentive to the inherent danger of smoothing contextual differences and imposing anachronistic and uncritical interpretations onto texts.

The hermeneutical gap inherent in holding together both a desire to engage explicitly with particular texts, and putting those texts in conversation with the 'grand narrative' of Scripture, certainly poses a threat to the Anglican Communion's common life. This is not least because those issues which have proved most contentious in the

46. Cuba User Group, *Report*, p. 2.

47. North America Regional Group, *Report*, p. 1.

48. North America Regional Group, *Report*, p. 1.

49. North America Regional Group, *Report*, p. 1.

50. S.R. Murray, 'Proof text or no text?', *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66.2 (2002), p. 170.

contemporary context (homosexuality, and the ministry of women) lend themselves easily to proof-texting and polarization.

Perhaps one factor, at least in the Western context, which threatens to hold apart this gap is the increasing 'privatization' of the Bible as 'a resource and guide for personal life' by which Christian faith and discipleship are conceived of predominantly as 'me and Jesus'.⁵¹ This is a tendency seemingly more prevalent in the West. The British Reference Group observed that readers 'did not want an academic approach or any theological answers to their questions' but 'people did generally want to use the text to inform life and decisions'.⁵² Alternatively in the South Sudan, 'despite the cultural disposition to orient toward the Bible, Sudanese students in formal educational settings are not always encouraged to see the connections between the Bible and their own lives'.⁵³

Nevertheless, Scriptural engagement which preferences personal ethics and holiness of life might unhelpfully neglect those issues of 'socioeconomic [and] political implications that concern our life in the world'.⁵⁴ This tendency in the West, within both the Academy and private devotion, to avoid political questions raised by biblical texts explains why 'liberationist hermeneutics' developing out of Latin America has felt so 'novel'.⁵⁵ Brueggemann pointedly observes that:

Many in the Church are scandalised when it is suggested that the Bible lives at the interface of the great issues of war and peace, health care delivery, economic justice, and management of the creaturely environment.⁵⁶

However, there are signs also that this privatization is being challenged.⁵⁷ The impact of social-scientific theories in hermeneutics 'makes explicit, and therefore open to criticism and debate, the models and assumptions being used' in biblical studies.⁵⁸ Engagement with

51. Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality*, pp. 18–19.

52. British Regional Group, *Report*, 2.

53. E. Davis, *'The Bible in the Life of the Sudanese Church': A Report Submitted to the Anglican Communion Office* (Duke Divinity School, 2011), p. 5.

54. Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality*, p. 19.

55. T. Gorringer, 'Political Readings of Scripture', in J. Barton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 74.

56. Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality*, p. 19.

57. Gorringer, 'Political Readings of Scripture', p. 76.

58. K. Whitelam, 'The Social World of the Bible', in J. Barton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 45.

the Bible at this level is to participate in the 'Grand Narrative' of the biblical themes of justice, emancipation, stewardship, redemption and transformation. If communion is incorporation into this narrative, then our use of the Bible ought to facilitate this and not simply be treated as a quarry from which to mine proof-texts in support of one or other presuppositions. This perhaps draws on a Patristic model of exegesis, where Scripture speaks with one complicated voice and different texts are creatively put in conversation with each other and where the theological underpinning of hermeneutics is that of dialogue rather than isolation.⁵⁹ Standing in this tradition, Anglican engagement with the Bible ought to draw us closer into communion both with God and each other:

In our reading together of the Bible, in our making sense of it, we are called into a deeper sense of engagement with God, one that combines our relatively brief time on earth with God's eternal nature.⁶⁰

The hermeneutical gaps identified by the project at least identify the 'hermeneutical space'⁶¹ into which 'conversations take place in search of meaning'.⁶²

Gap between Different Hermeneutical and Pedagogical Methodologies

Although the selection of materials for the first Case Study of the project was common across all the Regional Groups, there was significant variation in both hermeneutical and pedagogical methodologies within and between regions.

The report from North America explicitly identified at least four different methodological approaches, including a critical-feminist approach, a hermeneutic from the perspective of First Nation people, canonical criticism as well as an experiential approach which linked texts to an external associated artefact having some personal connection with each participant.⁶³ The Regional Report from East Africa specifically commended to the East African Anglican community as well as the entire worldwide Communion a hermeneutic

59. B. Daley, 'Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable? Some Reflections on Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms', in E. Davis and R. Hays (eds.), *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), p. 86.

60. H.-A. Hartley, *Making Sense of the Bible* (London: SPCK, 2011), p. 73.

61. B. Lundblad, *Marking Time: Preaching Biblical Stories in Present Tense* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 74.

62. Hartley, *Making Sense of the Bible*, p. 64.

63. North America Regional Group, *Report*, 3.

which drew on the wisdom of the 'primal societies'.⁶⁴ Attentiveness to these alternative methodologies offers a challenge to hermeneutical complacency:

Favouring the indigenous and the local ... encouraging self-affirmation and self-esteem [and] opposing centralizing systems and theories ... gives strength and visibility to those most in danger of being swept away by the controlling, but often subtle, effects of Western cultural imperialism.⁶⁵

These methodologies were most effective when well known to the participants and appropriate to their context; however, a gap was observed where 'outsiders' facilitated the scriptural engagement using hermeneutical methods which were unknown or did not translate easily across cultural, ethnic, theological and language boundaries.

Particularly effective in the experience of First Nation peoples in North America was an appreciation of the text as 'a tool to enable a meeting with and understanding of the divine will, guided by the fellowship of Christians under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit'.⁶⁶ This is a hermeneutic which emphasizes the inherent calling of the text speaking outwardly into the specific context of the community or individual, rather than a scrutiny or analysis from outside into the text:

[Sacred truth] has a necessary complexity that implies an interpretive humility ... Hence, if and when First Nation people engage in these conversations, they are careful not to respond too quickly. When it comes to scripture, many communities practice this in the structure of their gatherings. They begin by reading the text three times and, with each reading a question is asked: (1) what stands out for you, (2) what do you hear God saying, (3) what is God calling us to do? It is believed that God is present when you engage the text, God is actively involved and speaks when the community engages with the text.⁶⁷

As a tool for 'cultural formation' Scripture invites its hearers to be shaped by its narrative and to be incorporated into its promise.⁶⁸

64. East Africa Regional Group, *Report*, p. 2.

65. D. Holgate and R. Starr, *SCM Studyguide to Biblical Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2006), p. 131.

66. C. Rowland, B. Rees and R. Weston, 'Practical Exegesis in Context', in C. Rowland and J. Vincent (eds.), *Bible and Practice* (Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit, 2001), p. 11.

67. North America Regional Group, *Report*, pp. 4–5.

68. R.C. Van Leeuwen, 'Reading the Bible Whole in a Culture of Divided Hearts', *Ex auditu* 19 (2003), p. 11.

In this way it may rightly be understood as 'useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work' (2 Tim. 3.16–17) rather than a 'magic book, utterly unlike other books and dropped from heaven to reveal mysterious things'.⁶⁹ Communion requires communication across diverse cultures, as well as communication between text and context.⁷⁰

What has emerged from the study is a recognition of the need for diversity not only according to local church expression but also according to local need. Four key considerations illustrate that this gap must be bridged if it is not to be detrimental to the shared witness of Anglicanism.

First, cross-Communion scriptural engagement can only be successfully facilitated where there is an understanding of the breadth of different methods. A sympathetic awareness of the breadth of different hermeneutical and pedagogical methods across Anglicanism guards against an implicit preference by those facilitating cross-Communion scriptural engagement to work entirely within their own paradigms.

Similarly, a sharing of approaches across the Communion allows them to be tested in differing situations and their presuppositions critically evaluated afresh. Assumptions may be theologically, ideologically or culturally constructed and at worst may shape readings of Scripture which are inflexible and effectively predetermined. The benefit of this sharing is not necessarily the modification of methodologies themselves but rather the increase in self-awareness and reflection among their practitioners within the context of an approach 'grounded in prayer and seeking to foster friendship'.⁷¹

The third reason for bridging this gap builds on the concerns of the second, but perhaps casts them in a more positive light: the insights of unknown approaches may be given expression in new contexts. Alien methodologies might well offer something positive to parts of the Communion in which they were previously unknown. The various reports of the Bible in the Life of the Church project all identify a great diversity within, not just between, the different regions and insightful approaches from other parts of the Communion might well translate more directly into this dynamic diversity than traditionally inherited 'local' approaches.

69. Van Leeuwen, 'Reading the Bible Whole', p. 6.

70. Holgate and Starr, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 89.

71. Davis, *The Bible in the Life of the Sudanese Church*, p. 7.

Finally, a variety of hermeneutical and pedagogical methodologies can be put into fruitful conversation. Using a multiplicity of approaches not only caters for a diversity of participants but may also generate new understandings and insights which extend beyond the established fruits of singular methodologies:

The Bible and practice are in a dynamic relationship or conversation. It is a lively interaction. It is clear that there can be no formula or strict logical framework between them. In theological terms, this is an arena for the work of God's Spirit.⁷²

Such a dynamic also offers a wide and generous invitation across the Communion to mutual contribution and engagement across theological, as well as provincial, boundaries. As with all invitations, however, its success invariably depends on the openness of the response.

Gap between Different Hermeneutical Horizons

The final gap identified by the project is that created by the preferred hermeneutical horizons different readers bring to scriptural engagement. The metaphor of 'hermeneutical horizons' has been developed and represented according to a number of different models and has become 'almost a cliché in discussions of biblical hermeneutics'.⁷³ The concept was first introduced and described by German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer as:

The range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth.⁷⁴

According to Gadamer's original conception there is essentially only one horizon which frames events, texts, artefacts and so forth into a particular perspective, which is itself constantly shifting.⁷⁵ Within this single horizon readers have a preference to project a historical, textual or contextual horizon. These preferences were evident in the project where some readers engaged with questions of the historical world presented by the text, others with the *prima facie* witness of the words

72. I. Duffield, 'From Bible to Ministry Projects', in C. Rowland and J. Vincent (eds.), *Bible and Practice* (Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit, 2001), p. 75.

73. R. Nicholls, *Walking on the Water: Reading Mt. 14:22-33 in the Light of its Wirkungsgeschichte* (Biblical interpretation series; Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 7.

74. H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975), p. 301.

75. Nicholls, *Walking on the Water*, p. 9.

of the text itself, and still others attempting to connect the text with their own contemporary contexts.⁷⁶ Self-awareness of this preference shifts the relationship between the reader and their previous understanding, whereby the present and projected horizons fuse.⁷⁷ This fusion results in an enhanced clarity of interpretation and understanding:

The task of historical understanding also involves acquiring an appropriate historical horizon, so that what we are trying to understand can be seen in its true dimensions.⁷⁸

Anthony Thiselton continues this exploration particularly through his two works *The Two Horizons* (1980) and *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (1992). Thiselton departs slightly from Gadamer in understanding the different horizons as of the same nature and so the process of understanding is envisaged as '... communication between two sets of horizons'⁷⁹ rather than the setting of a particular perspective within its wider framework. Gaps are accentuated between our horizon and the text's through a number of factors including history, culture, philosophy and language.⁸⁰

The 2004 *Windsor Report*, which provided the mandate for the Bible in the Life of the Church project, identifies the consequence of this inability in scriptural engagement to move from one horizon preference to another:

A mention of scripture today can sometimes seem actually divisive, so aware are we of the bewildering range of available interpretative strategies and results. This is tragic, since, as with the Spirit who inspired scripture, we should expect that the Bible would be a means of unity, not division. In fact, our shared reading of scripture across boundaries of culture, region and tradition ought to be the central feature of our common life, guiding us together into an appropriately rich and diverse unity by leading us forward from entrenched positions into fresh appreciation of the riches of the gospel as articulated in the scriptures.⁸¹

76. A. Village, *The Bible and Lay People: An Empirical Approach to Ordinary Hermeneutics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 26.

77. Nicholls, *Walking on the Water*, p. 11.

78. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 302.

79. A.C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980), p. 168.

80. H.A. Virkler and Karelynn Gerber, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 19.

81. The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *Windsor Report*, § 62.

According to the Windsor Report, rather than strengthening and edifying the Anglican body, the reading and use of the Bible would seem instead to have become pointedly divisive. What results from this failure is less opportunity to appreciate the depth of Scripture's witness and a danger of moulding it to suit a preconceived agenda, divesting it of any prophetic potentiality. An ignorance of hermeneutical horizons may well contribute to the detriment of Anglican communion as individuals and groups become increasingly fixed in their preferred horizons. As a result, the use of the Bible only exacerbates breakdowns in unity and communication as different perspectives on, and interpretations of, Scripture are unable to be reconciled.

Conclusion

Inherent in each of these gaps is the holding in tension of distinctive hermeneutical principles. Failure to appreciate these tensions results in a relational impasse where different interpretations of Scripture across the Communion cannot be reconciled. To 'mind' the gaps involves not only the protection of this tension, but also a conscious 'mindfulness' of hermeneutical presuppositions and influences. Critical and reflective self-awareness has been a key component in discussion of each of the gaps, offering possibilities for these tensions to be held and conversations to continue.

The project refers to the 'fruits of study' and seems to equate this with the outcomes of interpretation. Such a mindset, however, presupposes a method of scriptural engagement which utilizes the Bible as a kind of moral and theological quarry from which to mine nuggets of truth. If Scripture is to shape a Communion which seeks to be formed by biblical encounter and witness, then the 'fruits' of this engagement ought to encompass much more than simply the history of a text's interpretation in narrow propositional terms. 'Fruits' are the product of nurture, growth and careful cultivation. This approach values the entire history of a text's impact across the hermeneutical horizon and so values the process of scriptural engagement as formational and transformational for the Christian community. Such an approach also complements traditional Anglican ecclesial polity with its emphasis on collaborative discernment, interdependence and commitment to the process of reception in the wake of contentious decisions.

The hermeneutical gaps identified by the project, if left unexamined or ignored, may well be detrimental to Anglican relational unity in communion. However, neither should the gaps be obliterated by

attempting to forge or impose a singular Anglican hermeneutic. Instead, Anglicans must learn to 'mind the gap': fostering connections between the 'academy' and the 'pew' in the way the Bible is read; appreciating the insights of both Scripture and other sources of wisdom across a range of contemporary issues; engaging with the challenge and particularity of discrete scriptural texts while putting them into conversation with the entire biblical witness as received in a diversity of contexts; sharing different hermeneutical and pedagogical methodologies; and moving between hermeneutical horizons. This is an approach which values the process and task of scriptural engagement as essential to the nurturing and growth of the fruits which are its product. It is also an approach which offers some opportunity and hope that the 'hermeneutical gaps' identified by the Bible in the Life of the Church project may not necessarily be detrimental to Anglican 'communion'.

Postscript: Update and Future Directions?

Since this paper has been written the final report of the Bible in the Life of the Church project, *Deep Engagement, Fresh Discovery*, has been published and presented to the 15th meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council.⁸² It was very positively received⁸³ and the Council welcomed the findings and outcome of the Project and congratulated all involved, commending it to 'Christian Education bodies, theological colleges and Doctrine Commissions across the Communion' requesting them to 'explore further the issues raised by the Project' and to translate its insights into local contexts (ACC15-Res 15.19).

The future of the Project depends very much on the extent to which it is taken into the life of the Communion through theological colleges and ministry settings. *Deep Engagement, Fresh Discovery* includes a number of resources which are aimed to promote further reflection and application in a variety of contexts. These include not only scholarly articles but also Bible studies which can be used by churches and small groups as well as worship and liturgy resources. It is

82. The full report, with accompanying resources, may be found at Bible in the Life of the Church Project, 'Deep Engagement: Fresh Discovery', Anglican Communion Office available at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/theological/bible/index.cfm> (accessed 30 January 2013).

83. L. Ashton, 'ACC Acclaims Project on the Bible', Anglican Communion News Service, <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/2012/11/2/ACNS5231> (accessed 30 January 2013).

intended that these resources will encourage and enable Anglicans to engage with hermeneutics in their common life of Christian discipleship and worship. Among the resources which the Project is working closely with is the Bible Society's h+ course which is explicitly designed for this kind of lay engagement with hermeneutics in local church contexts. These resources, currently available on a memory stick included with the printed report, are continually being updated as new material becomes available.⁸⁴

The other significant area for further development is the 'Themes and Principles' document included as a resource on the memory stick. This document was developed through an analysis of what the Communion has said historically about how the Bible has been read and used within Anglicanism, and from this analysis certain themes were identified and principles of an Anglican approach to using Scripture articulated. A critical analysis of this document is not within the scope of this paper but will no doubt be taken up with much interest as the Project itself becomes more widely known. It does offer the potential, however, of providing a benchmark for understanding how Anglicans use Scripture based not only on what the Communion has said historically about the Bible but also on what the Project has discerned through its own field-based research and testing across the Anglican spectrum.⁸⁵

84. I am grateful to Stephen Lyon, Project Coordinator, for his reflections on the future of the Project and ways forward. If readers are interested in further resources and future developments he would welcome and encourage contact through the Anglican Communion Office. Contact details may be found at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/theological/bible/index.cfm>

85. For these reflections I am grateful to Archbishop David Moxon, Chair of the Project's Steering Group.