

A RESPONSE TO
ARCHBISHOP PHILIP FREIER'S LETTER
TO THE BISHOPS OF AUSTRALIA (July 3, 2017)

Joe M. Thomas
Ohio, USA

Archbishop Philip Freier circulated a letterⁱ in conjunction with the consecration of Canon Andy Lines at the 2017 Provincial Assembly of the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA). Against his advice, two Australian bishops participated in the consecration. The consecration of Andy Lines as a bishop for Europe came in the wake of the Scottish Episcopal Church approving same-sex marriages in June 2017.

The approval of same-sex marriages and the ordination of gay ministers and bishops in the West have been a divisive factor among Christians. Church history is replete with examples of either schism or reconfiguration of denominations, prompted by various issues, including heresies and other doctrinal disagreements. Justifiable or not, these factors continue to emerge in the global ecclesiastical bodies. Christian churches in the Global South condemn homosexuality as a sin. They wouldn't even consider a so-called 'celibate homosexual' to teach at a theological seminary. Their stance is based on the conviction that the Bible condemns homosexuality. Of course, they know that this is not the only sin that the Bible condemns.

The Australian Archbishop's letter reveals two good motives, namely, the need for guarding the unity of the Anglican Church in Australia and to affirm its solidarity with the member churches of the Anglican Communion, whose head is the Archbishop of Canterbury. In this regard, the letter is a timely exercise. However, he has said a few things in his letter that need to be probed. Let me identify and address them in the following manner.

Koinonia. The Primate's idea of *koinonia* is to be challenged. He rightly understands it as a "gift of our Lord to his Church," but immediately applies it to the Anglican Church in Australia "through its constitution and the framework it establishes."

Koinonia (Communion) is certainly a biblical term. From a biblical standpoint, it is a mistake to apply it primarily to the constitution of the church. When *koinonia* is applied in this way, he is ignoring the character of the term as a transcending and internal spiritual reality that embraces and binds all believers everywhere in the global fellowship of Jesus Christ. Of course, this reality can also reveal itself in the organizational unity of the visible church, and that is because of its internal spiritual nature that I addressed above. The Church of Jesus Christ is a global body of believers. All believers, regardless of where they are found, are indwelt by the same Spirit.

The Primate's notion that the gift of *koinonia* indwells primarily some denominational hierarchy and framework, and not the people of God, is to be rejected. What is the nature of ecclesiology he espouses in this case? By no means can such a notion be justified on the basis of God's Word. *Koinonia* is a sharing in one divine reality that the people of God have in common, and it is prior to an organized denomination. The experience of *koinonia* and the love for the saints can easily be

disrupted when churches allow themselves to be shaped by cultural programs and agendas that are antithetical to the teachings of the Bible. The approval of same-sex marriages has created disappointments and disunity among members of several denominations.

Council of Nicaea. Archbishop Freier makes a reference to the Council of Nicaea. Those who have examined the historico-theological contexts of this Council and the Creed would find it difficult to compare it to the situation in Australia. Let the Archbishop fully explain how the Council of Nicaea, which was convened to deal with a major Christological heresy that was threatening the ancient church can be applied to the current situation in Australia.

I find it surprising that the Archbishop does not rely on any passage from the Bible to support his arguments. Instead, he labors long and hard in the letter to find support from the national constitution and canon. These seem to be the sources of authority for him. Therefore, I would like to make a few more statements about these documents and their established purposes in the history of the church.

Constitution, Creed, Council, and Canon. No serious-minded Christian would deny the importance of these instruments that churches have created and used for centuries. For Anglican Christians, creeds are very important. Even a cursory review of the origins and developments of various creeds would show us that the church is prompted to provide structure and direction to regulate its life in a variable world. These instruments are highly effective in regulating the administrative life of the church. It is within the power of the church to draw up such theological guidelines in order to help the church's organizational life and public worship. Therefore, it is important to uphold canons and church orders as necessary guidelines for the proper maintenance of the visible body of believers. The Corinthian Church in the New Testament proves the need for order and unity in any given church. "God is not a God of confusion, but of peace" (1 Cor. 14:33). But the canons and creeds must not be allowed to go contrary to the laws of Christ; they should make the proclamation of the gospel easier.

It is important to remember that these instruments, to which appeal has been made by the Archbishop, has no ultimate authority in matters of faith; they are dependent upon God's written revelation, which has priority in every ecclesiastical decision-making process.

While Archbishop Freier stands for the preservation of the Anglican Communion, he forgets the fact that it is the non-Anglo-Saxon Anglican provinces that make up the bulk of Anglican Communion. He has lost sight of the many GAFCON primates and bishops who participated in the consecration of Andy Lines.

Let the Primate tell us how many of the 39 members (including the new South Sudan Province) in the Communion would support same-sex marriages or the consecration of a gay bishop. There may be isolated entities, but they have been pressured to alter their stance on same-sex union through the relentless, crosscultural advocacy of their Western counterparts.

All of us, including the Primate, believe that the church's faith and life are based on the Word of God. Therefore, it is unwise to speak about unity without first addressing the scriptural requirements for that unity. Is it not the Word that reveals the nature and essence of the church?

Without the Word, how do we know what the church is? The unity of the body cannot be achieved while some members are compromising the teachings of Jesus Christ, who is the head of the body.

The call for protecting the organizational unity by ignoring the precedence of the gospel is to advocate a false sense of unity. It is a sign of spiritual degeneration when church leaders emphasize constitutions and frameworks by risking the primacy of the Word in matters of faith and life.

The Australian Anglican framework itself cannot be the church. The Primate gives the impression that the framework is an end in itself. All frameworks and constitutions are subordinate to the absolute authority of the Word. They are valuable and useful for the purposes for which they were formulated by the church, but are worthy of credence only to the extent they agree with the Word. They are subject to change, revision, and improvement, as new situations arise in any given society.

The Archbishop has no criticism for the Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church for its approval of same-sex marriages. He makes a passing, value-free comment about it in one sentence. The cultural contexts of the churches in the West have been changing rapidly. The mission of the church faces formidable challenges in the present. Therefore, a reconfiguration of the provinces can be really effective in the proclamation of the gospel. All God's people who uphold the centrality of the written revelation of God must work together in the mission of Jesus Christ. It is "together will all the saints" that we grasp how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ is (Eph. 3:18).

A Call to Mission. The Anglican Church in Australia is registering its worst numerical decline in the present time. A growing number of Australians do not claim to have anything to do with the church. They are not familiar with the constitution and framework that the Primate is talking about. Many younger parents do not even have sufficient knowledge of Christianity to shape the Christian character of their children.

This is also true of the many who were raised in the Church of England. Generally speaking, a large number of them cannot even relate to the origins or significance of the creeds.

For a long time, the Australian Anglican Church has excluded racial diversity at the top. Although there are encouraging signs of racial diversity in the present time, especially in the diocese of Sydney, there must be more significant changes that apprehend the new cultural mosaic. Whatever signs of change visible in the church have been forced upon it from the outside, from the new reality of Christian immigrants from other countries. A church that lives alone will die alone.

The declining numbers are also true for Europeans, who struggle with a loss of Christian memory. There is an appalling loss of memory about Christian history. Many call themselves "areligious" or "atheists," even as modern European societies are witnessing a sharp and spectacular rise of Islam. This is another opportunity for Europe "to strengthen what remains and is about to die" through a fresh thinking about the gospel and its implications for life.

It is the responsibility of church leaders to guard the holiness of the church by excluding those who depart from the truth or lead dishonorable lives. The Reformers have taught us that one of the marks of a faithful church is its diligence in administering church discipline.

The necessity of church discipline is taught in the Bible (Mt. 18:15-18; Ro. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:2, 9-13; 2 Cor. 2:5-10; 2 Thess. 3:6,14,15; Tit. 3:10-11). The purity of the church is the ultimate aim of biblical discipline.

In my observation, the churches in the West are facing a number of critical problems: the crisis of confidence in the gospel, disregard for the purity of the church, uncritical adaptation of cultural trends from the surrounding secularized society that excluded the presence of God, and a compromised inter-religious relationship that ignores the Christian self-identity and self-consciousness, and the ideology of religious pluralism that disregards the uniqueness of Jesus Christ for salvation. The perceptions of many church leaders are too often culturally conditioned, and they confuse the substance of the gospel with these perceptions.

Most of our Anglican Christians live outside of Europe and North America. Anglicans in the West are a microscopic community, in comparison to the growing provinces in Africa and Asia.

The lost moral grounds can be reclaimed only through a fresh understanding of the gospel, faithful instruction in doctrine and theology, a revitalization of parish life, and embracing those Christians (including the ACNA) who remain committed to the non-negotiable and ultimate authority of the Word of God.

I would like to conclude my response by drawing our attention to the instructions of St. Paul to the Elders of the Church at Ephesus: *Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears* (Acts 20:28-31, emphasis added).

ⁱ <http://www.anglicanprimate.org.au/2017/07/03/letter-to-australias-bishops/>

[Please note, this response was not written for publication. If you quote from it, or forward it to another person, please email me at joe212528@gmail.com.

The Rev. Canon Joe M. Thomas, B.Sc., M.Div., M.A., M.W.S., PH.D.