

The view of Scripture taken by the Church of England
and the Anglican Communion

The official view of the Church of England regarding Scripture is expressed in two places, the Canons and the three historic formularies (The Thirty Nine Articles, The Book of Common Prayer and the 1662 Ordinal).

The Canons

Canon A.5 states that ‘the doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures’ and Canon C.15 declares that the Church of England ‘professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures.’

The Historic Formularies

a) *The Articles*

The key Articles that touch on the Church of England’s view of Scripture are Articles 6, 7, 20 and 21. The purpose of these Articles is to set out the Church of England’s position with regard to the nature and authority of Scripture in response to challenges from two directions. On the one hand there was a challenge from those who remained loyal to Rome, who (a) viewed the Apocrypha as part of Scripture and (b) gave the Church and its traditions and the decisions of General Councils (including the Council of Trent) doctrinal authority equal to that of Scripture. On the other hand there was a challenge from various radical Protestant groups who taught that the basis for theology was the immediate guidance of the Spirit rather than Scripture and who held either that the Old Testament was irrelevant for Christians or that the entire Old Testament law was still binding upon them.

In response to these challenges the Articles declare:

- Scripture contains all things ‘necessary to salvation’, with the consequence that whatever ‘is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any Man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith or be thought requisite and necessary for salvation.’ (Article 6).¹
- That Scripture means the sixty-six canonical books (the thirty nine books of the Hebrew Old Testament and the twenty seven books of the Greek New Testament which had become generally accepted by the Church during the Patristic period), with the books of the Apocrypha being read by the Church ‘for example of life and instruction of manners’ but not being looked to ‘to establish any doctrine’ (Article 6). ‘Doctrine’ in this context

¹ The *Articles* nowhere explain why Scripture contains ‘all things necessary for salvation,’ but this point is explained by Archbishop Cranmer in his homily ‘A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading of Holy Scripture’ in the *First Book of Homilies*. In this he writes that in Scripture: ‘is fully contained what we ought to do, and what to eschew; what to believe, what to love, and what to look for at God’s hands at length. In these Books we shall find the Father from whom, the Son by whom, and the Holy Ghost, in whom all things have their being and keeping up, and these three persons to be but one God, and one substance. In these books we may learn to know ourselves, how vile and miserable we be, and also to know God, how good he is of himself, and how he maketh us and all creatures partakers of his goodness.’

(*dogmata* in the Latin version of the Articles) means authoritative teaching covering what we would now describe as both faith and morals.

- The Old and New Testaments belong together for in both of them salvation is offered to Mankind in Christ and although the ritual and civil law of the Old Testament is not still binding on Christians they are still bound by the fundamental moral law that it contains. (Article 7)
- The role of the Church is to be a ‘witness and keeper’ of Scripture. That is to say, the Church is called to bear witness to Scripture as the place where people can discover what they need to know in order to be saved and it is called to keep the biblical canon whole and entire and pass it on down the generations. The Church does not have the right to interpret Scripture in such a way as to make one part of Scripture contradict another. (Article 20)
- The Church does not have the authority to decree anything contrary to Scripture and neither the Church nor General Councils have the authority to teach that anything additional to Scripture is necessary for salvation. (Articles 20 and 21)

In addition to what is said in these four Articles, Article 19 follows Article 7 of the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession* in teaching that the preaching of the ‘pure Word of God’ (that is to say, preaching that faithfully expounds Scripture) is one of the marks of the visible Church of Christ and the Articles as a whole testify to the authority of Scripture by the way in which they constantly refer explicitly or implicitly to Scripture when addressing the theological issues of the Reformation era.

The Book of Common Prayer

The purpose of the *Book of Common Prayer* was to restore what the English Reformers believed was the ‘godly and decent’ pattern of liturgy that was practised by the ‘ancient Fathers’ but had become corrupted during the Middle Ages.

The only explicit statement about Scripture that the *Book of Common Prayer* contains is found in the collect for the Second Sunday in Advent. This declares that God has caused Holy Scripture to be written in order to teach his people, that Christians need to have an active engagement with Scripture (‘that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them’) and that the purpose of this engagement is to enable us to ‘embrace and ever hold fast’ the hope of everlasting life given to us in Christ. In addition to this single explicit statement, however, the *Book of Common Prayer* also bears constant implicit witness to the central importance of Scripture both in the way that it makes provision for the regular and systematic reading of the Bible (plus parts of the Apocrypha) in English and in the way in which the services are full of quotations from the Bible and allusions to biblical texts and biblical ideas.

The 1662 Ordinal

The purpose of the *Ordinal* was to produce a pattern of ordained ministry in the Church of England that was in line with the teaching of Scripture and the practice of the Early Church. In line with the teaching of the *Articles*, in the *Ordinal* those who are ordained as priests and bishops have to declare their belief ‘that the holy Scriptures contain sufficiently all doctrine required of necessity for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ’ and, as a corollary, promise that they will not teach or maintain that anything is necessary for salvation except that which ‘may be concluded and proved by the Scripture.’

In addition, the *Ordinal* provides that either the New Testament (in the case of deacons) or the whole Bible (in the case of priests and bishops) is to be delivered to those who have been ordained. The purpose of this giving of the Scriptures is to make it clear that their ministry will take place under the authority of Scripture and that the reading, preaching and application of Scripture will be at its heart. Also, like the *Book of Common Prayer*, the *Ordinal* bears constant implicit witness to the importance of Scripture through the provision of lessons from the Bible and through the way the services are full of biblical quotations and allusions.

In addition to the witness of the Canons and formularies the Church of England and Anglican view of Scripture also finds expression in *Common Worship*, the resolutions of the Lambeth Conferences and various ecumenical statements.

Common Worship

Common Worship is the generic title for a variety of liturgical material that has been authorised by the Church of England since 2000 to supplement the *Book of Common Prayer*. This material has been authorised on the understanding that it is in doctrinal agreement with the *Book of Common Prayer* and with regard to the view taken of Scripture this agreement can be seen in a number of ways.

First, *Common Worship* has its own version of the Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent (this is now set for the last Sunday in Trinity). Secondly, in the *Common Worship* ordination services all those being ordained have to declare that they ‘accept the Holy Scriptures as revealing all things necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ’ and they are still given an entire Bible in order ‘to give vivid liturgical expression to the truth that all Christian ministers are under the authority of that Word.’² Thirdly, provision is made for the regular systematic public reading of Scripture, including parts of the Apocrypha (with the readings regularly being followed by the affirmation ‘this is the word of the Lord,’). Fourthly, as in the *Book of Common Prayer*, the *Common Worship* services are full of quotations from, and allusions to, biblical texts and biblical ideas.

Lambeth Conference Resolutions

Although Lambeth Conference resolutions do not have legal authority in the churches of the Anglican Communion, they have traditionally been seen as possessing moral authority because they have reflected the mind of the Communion as discerned by its bishops taking counsel together.

There have been a number of resolutions which have expressed the Anglican view of Scripture.

Resolution 11 of 1888 declares that part of the basis for ‘home reunion’ between churches needs to be the belief that ‘The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments’ contain ‘all things necessary to salvation,’ and are ‘the rule and ultimate standard of faith’ and in similar fashion Resolution 9 (vi) of 1920 states that the visible unity of the Church will need to involve a ‘wholehearted acceptance’ of ‘the Holy Scriptures, as the record of God’s revelation of himself to man, and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.’

² *Common Worship Ordination Services, Study Edition*, London: CHP, 2007, p.135

Resolution 3 of 1930 states ‘we affirm the supreme and unshaken authority of the Holy Scriptures as presenting the truth concerning God and the spiritual life in its historical setting and in its progressive revelation, both throughout the Old Testament and in the New.’

Resolution 1 of 1958 affirms ‘that the Bible discloses the truths about the relation of God and man which are the key to the world's predicament and is therefore deeply relevant to the modern world’ and Resolution 3 of the same year further affirms that the role of the Church is to be the ‘guardian and interpreter of Holy Scripture’ and that it ‘may teach nothing as ‘necessary for eternal salvation but what may be concluded and proved by the Scripture.’’³

Ecumenical Statements

It is also important to note what has been said about Scripture in a number of ecumenical statements that have been endorsed by the Church of England since what is said in them has been seen by the Church of England as being in line with its own theology.

The Meissen, Porvoo, Fetter Lane, and Reuilly statements agreed with churches from the Lutheran, Reformed and Moravian traditions all affirm the authority of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, with the Porvoo statement adding more fully that the Scriptures are ‘the sufficient, inspired and authoritative record and witness, prophetic and apostolic, to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ.’ The Meissen, Porvoo and Reuilly statements all also declare in line with the *Articles* and the *1662 Ordinal* that the Scriptures ‘contain everything necessary to salvation.’⁴

The Anglican Methodist Covenant states that ‘both the Church of England and the Methodist Church ground their belief and teaching on the Holy Scriptures, which they hold to be inspired by God.’⁵ Lastly, the Anglican-Roman Catholic joint statement *Growing Together in Unity and Mission* states that ‘the Scriptures as the uniquely inspired witness to divine revelation have a unique role in keeping alive the Church’s memory of the teaching and work of Christ’ and that ‘the Church’s teaching, preaching and action must constantly be measured against the Scriptures.’⁶

Post-Reformation developments in thinking about Scripture

All the affirmations about Scripture noted above reflect, or are consistent with, what was said by the Church of England at the time of the Reformation. It is also important to note, however, that Anglican thinking about Scripture has also reflected post-Reformation developments.

One of these developments, which began at the end of the sixteenth century, has been the placing of a greater emphasis on the role of reason and tradition in interpreting Scripture than was acknowledged in Reformation statements about Scripture. This is reflected, for example, in what is said about Scripture in the 1997 *Virginia Report* of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission which, while affirming ‘the sovereign authority of the Holy Scriptures as the medium through which God by the Spirit communicates his word to the Church,’ also talks about the

³ These Resolutions can be found in R Coleman (ed), *Resolutions of the Lambeth Conferences 1867-1888*, Toronto, Anglican Book Centre, 1992.

⁴ These statements can be found in *Meissen Agreement Texts*, London: Council for Christian Unity, 1992, *The Porvoo Common Statement*, London: Council for Christian Unity, 1993, *Anglican-Moravian Conversations*, London: Council for Christian Unity, 1996, and *Called to Witness and Service*, London: CHP, 1999.

⁵ *An Anglican Methodist Covenant*, Peterborough and London: Methodist Publishing House/CHP, 2001, p.34.

⁶ *Growing Together in Unity and Mission*, London: SPCK, 2007, p.21. See also the elucidation to the ARCIC I report ‘Authority in the Church I’ in *The Final Report*, London: CTS/SPCK, 1982 pp.69-71.

‘characteristic Anglican way of living with a constant dynamic interplay of Scripture, tradition and reason.’⁷

Another development has been the fact that since the end of the eighteenth century a range of issues have arisen that have challenged the way that Christians have traditionally understood and interpreted Scripture. These issues have arisen as a result of a number of factors including the emergence of the critical historical study of the Bible, the growing prestige of the natural sciences, the emergence of philosophical objections to the idea of God acting in history in the way that Scripture describes and to the morality of aspects of the biblical account and developments in literary theory that have raised new ways of thinking about what it means to read and interpret texts.

These issues have been wrestled with by individual scholars,⁸ but they have also been addressed by representative groups writing on behalf of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion. Examples of the latter would include, for example, material contained in the 1938 report of the Archbishops’ Commission on Christian Doctrine, *Doctrine in the Church of England*, in the 1981 and 1987 Doctrine Commission Reports *Believing in the Church* and *We believe in God* and in the 2003 Church of England report *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* and also the 1958 Lambeth Conference report ‘The Holy Bible its authority and message.’⁹

None of this work by individual scholars or groups has received the same sort of acceptance and authorisation as the statements about Scripture noted earlier in this paper. What it does indicate, however, is that constructive engagement with contemporary issues regarding the nature and interpretation of Scripture has come to be accepted as an important part of Anglican theology and a fully rounded picture of the Church of England Anglican approach to Scripture needs to take this fact into account.

The Authorized Version

The *Authorized Version* of the Bible of 1611, which drew on a series of earlier English translations of the Bible produced during the Reformation, established itself as the predominant translation of the Bible in the English speaking world and in its various editions it remained the most widely read version of the Bible in the Church of England until well into the twentieth century. It has been the origin of a family of subsequent English translations that has included the *Revised Version*, the *Revised Standard Version* and the *New Revised Standard Version* and it has had a wide influence on the development of English language and literature in general. As the House of Bishops note *Versions of Scripture* explains, the *Authorized Version* remains one of the versions of Scripture ‘judged suitable for reading in church during the course of public worship’ (see Appendix 1).

Dr Martin Davie

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⁷ *The Official Report of the Lambeth Conference 1998*, Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1999, pp.12-13.

⁸ For recent examples from different standpoints see S Barton, *Invitation to the Bible*, London: SPCK, 1997, John Webster, *Holy Scripture*, Cambridge: CUP, 2003 and NT Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* :London: SPCK, 2005.

⁹ *Doctrine in the Church of England*, London: SPCK, 1982 pp.27-33, *Believing in the Church*, London: SPCK, 1981 pp.25-44, *We Believe in God*, London: CHP, 1984, pp. 51-68, *The Lambeth Conference 1958*, London: SPCK 1958, Pt 2, pp.1-19.

Appendix 1

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VERSIONS OF SCRIPTURE A Note by the House of Bishops

1. While the Church of England authorises the Lectionary – what passages are to be read on which occasion – it does not authorize particular translations of the Bible. Nevertheless, among the criteria by which versions of Scripture are judged suitable for reading in church during the course of public worship are the following:
 - Faithfulness in translating the Hebrew or Greek
 - Resonance with the language of prayer used in the particular authorized service
 - Suitability for reading aloud in a public gathering
 - Use of familiar language in well-known quotations or figures of speech
 - Familiarity to the listener
 - Intelligibility to the listener
 - Appropriateness to the linguistic register of the particular congregation
2. A distinction needs to be drawn between *translation* and *paraphrase*. Versions which are read in church during the course of public worship should be translations of the Bible, not paraphrases of it. In less formal contexts, paraphrases may be useful.
3. Versions of Scripture which are translations and appear to satisfy at least four of the criteria set out in paragraph 1 above include:
 - **The Authorized Version** or King James Bible (AV), published in 1611, of which a Revised Version was published in 1881-5
 - **The Revised Standard Version** (RSV), originally published in the USA in 1952 and based on the 1901 American Standard Version of the 1881 revision of the AV
 - **The New International Version** (NIV), copyrighted 1973-1984 by the International Bible Society
 - **The New Jerusalem Bible** (NJB), published in 1985 – a revision of the Jerusalem Bible (JB), originally published in 1966, which was based on the *Bible de Jérusalem* (1956)
 - **The New Revised Standard Version** (NRSV), an inclusivized revision of the RSV, published in an anglicized version in 1989
 - **The Revised English Bible** (REB), published in 1989 – a revision of the New English Bible (NEB), which was originally published between 1961 and 1970
 - **The English Standard Version** (ESV), published in 2002 and based on the RSV, with priority given, in the area of gender language, to rendering literally what is in the original
4. Decisions about which version to use on which occasion are best made as locally as possible.
5. It should be noted that the NIV and the ESV do not include the Apocrypha, which is a necessary resource for Church of England lectionaries.
6. Some of the translations listed in paragraph 3 are ‘inclusive’ translations which avoid the use of masculine nouns and pronouns when reference is made to women as well as men.

Where a masculine noun or pronoun is used in the original language, making an English text 'inclusive' necessarily involves a degree of departure from accurate translation. A conscious choice would have to be made between the two criteria of inclusivity and accuracy in respect of any of these versions.

On behalf of the House

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