

What Do Anglicans Believe? A Review Article

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What Do Anglicans Believe? A Study Guide to Christian Doctrine from Anglican and Ecumenical Statements

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The Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order (IASCUFO), working with the Anglican Communion Office’s department of Theological Education in the Anglican Communion (TEAC), has produced a short 45-page study guide entitled *What Do Anglicans Believe?* (2020). It has been distributed widely, in English, Spanish, Portuguese and French, with a particular focus on institutions providing theological education within the Anglican Communion. It is presented as a working draft, with the goal of assisting readers in “deciding how doctrine in general, and specific doctrines, should play a more contextually authentic and inspiring role in our worship, mission and discipleship, and then resolving to make those changes” (p. 7). But it is seriously misleading and points us in the wrong directions.

The Purpose of *What Do Anglicans Believe?*

The study guide needs to be judged against its own criteria. It is no use expecting it to be what it was never intended to be. A critical question, then, is how the authors themselves explain the purpose and goal of this document. The introduction, by TEAC Director, Dr Stephen Spencer, suggests: “In this study guide ... a concise and well-grounded introduction to Christian doctrine is assembled for use in home groups, study programmes, seminaries and theological colleges across the Anglican Communion” (p. 5). Whether the document succeeds in providing such a “well-grounded introduction to Christian doctrine” will soon be shown. However, it is important to realise this is the bold claim being made for it, further enlarged with the coordinate claim that it provides an opportunity for students to spend time “in the study of the doctrines of the Christian faith, the beliefs which undergird all that we do ... with the help of Anglican and ecumenical texts freely available on the internet” (p. 5). It progresses from the nature of doctrine in general, to the doctrines of the Nicene Creed, to the doctrine of the church, aiming to draw on “a rich selection of Anglican and ecumenical ecclesiological statements” (pp. 5–6). It is this reference to “ecclesiological” statements that clarifies an initial ambiguity in the third of these three steps. “The doctrine of the

church” ends up being, not what is taught by the church (the church’s doctrine), but her teaching about the nature and marks of the church and the sacraments (pp. 21–42). Why this doctrine is elevated to such importance is not entirely clear.

Rather than adopting a didactic approach, the study guide sets out to be more interactive, acknowledging that the texts it cites “need to be understood, interpreted and expressed in worship, mission and discipleship” and that this “will be different in different places” (p. 6). So a series of questions and answers runs through each of the three chapters and the overall approach is characterised as “See, Judge, Act” or “Taking in, Taking stock, Taking action” (p. 6). It aims to move from the learner’s context, to particular texts, to a practical response. This might be described, in other terms, as a movement from social analysis to textual analysis to application.

What Is Doctrine?

The first chapter is entitled “What is Doctrine?” It begins by asking questions about the current state and place of doctrine in the life of the church. Here is the context in which we will be better able to answer the overall question “What Do Anglicans Believe?” The purpose of the exercise, we are told, is “not to provide a final set of answers but to start asking some relevant questions, to raise awareness of the issues and to see that all is not what it could be within the lived reality of the church community” (p. 8).

This is a fascinating, and ultimately deeply disappointing, way to approach the question of what is doctrine, whether understood in general terms or more specifically as *Anglican* doctrine. There is here no appeal to the way the New Testament uses the word *didaskalia* to speak of the sound teaching that is received, which stands over against false teaching, and which shapes the way of life of those who have been taught and seek to live as students (“disciples”) of Christ. No attempt is made to examine how the New Testament fills out the content of that teaching or its enduring, unchanging character. Partly this is because of the methodological misstep of attempting to discern “What Anglicans believe” (or should believe) with reference to ecumenical documents. Partly it is because, from the introduction onwards, no serious distinction is made between the authority of Scripture—the unique and final authority in all matters of faith and life, the only norm that is not normed by anything else—and the other lesser (and normed) authorities of church teaching and scholarship (p. 6). But fundamentally the methodological direction is all wrong: starting with what Christians (or a particular subset of Christians) believe rather than what God is teaching us about himself, the world and humanity in and through his word. Christian doctrine or

theology, as one contemporary and highly respected Anglican theologian never tired of saying, is the study of God and all things in relation to God (reflecting the centuries-old definition of Thomas Aquinas).¹ We learn God from God. Our natural religious intuition, on the other hand, only fuels “a perpetual factory of idols.”² In contrast to the approach adopted in this study guide, the writer to the Hebrews points us in the correct methodological direction: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb 1:1–2).

The second step in this chapter is the attempt to gain some critical perspective by learning from “authorities such as scripture, church teaching and scholarship” (p. 8). There is, however, only one reference to Scripture, and that reference treats the unity of the church not the nature of doctrine, so it is essentially tangential to the main thrust of the chapter. In contrast, there is repeated appeal to documents like the Anglican Consultative Council’s *Intentional Discipleship and Disciple-Making* (2016) and *The Anglican Covenant* (2009), alongside *Notions of “Hierarchy of Truth”* (1990) from the World Council of Churches (WCC). Intriguingly it includes the highly controversial *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999), which famously provoked an article from Eberhard Jüngel entitled “For God’s Sake Clarity!” But this study guide insists that the *Joint Declaration* proves that “the churches now share ‘a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ’” and demonstrates that “the 500 year old conflict” between Catholics and Protestants is “essentially resolved” (p. 15).³

There are some very helpful statements made in this first chapter which could easily have been sourced in Scripture. It is profoundly true that “to be a Christian is to follow and be shaped by Jesus Christ” (p. 10). Jesus’s words at the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7:21–27), or after his first foretelling of his death and resurrection (Matt 16:24–29), make that very clear. A difficulty arises, though, not when we hear that

¹ John Webster, “*Omnia ... pertractantur in sacra doctrina sub ratione Dei*. On the Matter of Christian Theology,” in *God and the Works of God*, vol. 1 of *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 4; “God, Theology, Universities,” in *Virtue and Intellect*, vol. 2 of *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 159.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, 2 vols., LCC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1:108 (*Inst.* 1.11.8).

³ Eberhard Jüngel, “Um Gottes willen—Klarheit! Kritische Bemerkungen zur Verharmlosung der kriteriologischen Funktion des Rechtfertigungsartikels—aus Anlaß einer ökumenischen »Gemeinsamen Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre«,“ *ZTK* 94 (1997):394–406.

“discipleship is the very essence of Anglicanism,” which must be true by natural extension if Anglicanism is a mode of being Christian, but when the concept is pressed into the service of an affirmation of the “Catholic-Protestant nature of the Anglican Communion.” A multiple confusion of categories has occurred at that point and it serves an unexamined ecumenical agenda. How true is it that “We discover the true meaning of the Catholic [capitalised] nature of the Church as we follow a Saviour who unites all people, all things, in himself, and we discover the true vocation of Protestantism as our discipleship leads us into a prophetic engagement with all that is not holy” (p. 10)?

The confusion gets worse. A totally unexceptionable statement about Christians through the ages reflecting together on how to speak about their faith and the importance of effective communication, leads to a dubious conclusion: “It can be said that God’s people are doing theology and reflecting doctrinally whenever they talk about the nature of God, about God’s acts of creation and redemption and tell others about all this *in new and fresh ways*” (p. 10, emphasis added). This sets the ground for the questions “To what extent does your church ‘proclaim afresh’ the Christian faith?” (p. 11) and “Is there a need to find new ways to express doctrine?” (p. 16). On the level of effective communication across cultures this is undoubtedly an important consideration. Yet without an anchor in the final authority of Scripture, and an acute sense of “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), the door is opened for the modification of doctrine. This becomes more evident when we are told: “Different periods of history with their different cultures require new ways of understanding and expressing the faith.” The placement of “understanding” alongside “expressing” the faith is a Trojan horse. It is one thing to insist on the need to *express* the faith differently due to the passage of time and differences of culture. It is another to insist equally that the faith needs to be *understood* differently. If this had been framed by some reference to the inviolable authority of Scripture and the unchanging nature of the living God’s personal and self-manifesting truth revealed to us in Scripture, then there would be little concern. That reference, however, is sadly missing.

Once again it becomes obvious how the ecumenical agenda has influenced this study guide, notwithstanding the title *What do Anglicans Believe?* The authors argue that “in fact, the church has engaged in reformulation and re-ordering of doctrine over many centuries” (p. 16). We move seamlessly from the way the church in each age must “find new words which, in the language of these new generations, will rightly express that faith,” to “different orderings and emphases in the doctrinal expressions of various churches” (p. 16). “In the ecumenical dialogue,” we are told, “churches may become more aware of existing hierarchies or ordering of truths in their tradition and life. Through dialogue changes

can result also in the ordering of a church's own teaching, and this can facilitate rapprochement" (p. 17). This leads to the last question of the chapter, one which is meant to facilitate the move from reflection to practice: "In your experience have encounters with other churches made you change your understanding of certain doctrines?" (p. 17).

This opening chapter on the nature of doctrine ends up commending the possibility of doctrinal change through ecumenical encounters. No doubt such encounters may involve looking again at the teaching of Scripture, seeking to align our own convictions with that teaching and challenging both our own misunderstandings and those of our conversation partners. A change of mind (repentance) is the appropriate response when we are shown to be thinking or teaching something that is contrary to the teaching of Scripture. This immovable and unchangeable touchstone, Holy Scripture, stands above all church teaching (even that of our creeds, catechisms and confessions, let alone the products of our ecumenical conversations) and all the assured conclusions of biblical and theological scholarship. The God who has given us his written word is not taken by surprise by modern developments. His knowledge of all things is never fragmentary, never constrained or distorted by cultural bias or the intellectual milieu of the moment, never faulty or mistaken. His unchanging truth stands over the flux of human understanding. He is able to communicate his truth effectively, even through the conscious and creative agency of fragile and fallible human writers. Yet the supreme and final authority of Scripture does not feature anywhere in this study guide and so the reason for doctrinal change is left as rapprochement (in the first instance with other churches, but why need it stop there and not extend, for example, to our contemporary cultural consensus on ethical matters?)

What is the Doctrine of the Creeds?

In the second chapter an appeal is made to the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Paper 153, *Confessing the One Faith* (1991). This paper is described as "a foundational statement for the contemporary church, one of the most important texts to come out of the Faith and Order movement towards the end of the Twentieth century" (p. 18). This is a somewhat overblown claim given some of the enduring criticisms of the WCC text and the rather limited use that has been made of it, not just in Anglican circles, but more widely in the Christian churches. Even veteran ecumenist Mary Tanner, in the preface to the 2010 revised edition, recognised it did not catch the imagination of the churches as other WCC documents had done and lamented, "perhaps it was unrealistic to expect such a

widespread engagement and official response from the churches.”⁴ That is not to say, of course that she thought the document was unimportant or that it did not have the potential to be influential. Yet the reality of the lukewarm reception for the WCC’s text does not match the claim made for it in *What do Anglicans Believe?*

Confessing the One Faith is an explication of the Nicene Creed.⁵ The decision of the WCC’s Faith and Order Commission to use the Creed is explained in this way:

This Creed:

- has been more universally received than any other symbol of the faith, as a normative expression of the essential content of the apostolic faith;
- is part of the historical heritage of contemporary Christianity;
- has been in liturgical use through the centuries to express the one faith of the Church.

The Nicene Creed thus serves to indicate whether the faith as set forth in modern situations is the same faith as the one the church confessed through the centuries.⁶

The choice of the Nicene Creed is thus entirely defensible. The Creed does set out core doctrines of Christian belief, though its focus is determined to a large degree by the controversies of the fourth century. It is not, however, exhaustive. There is much more to Christian faith—the doctrines of justification, sanctification, election, the sacraments, and Scripture are just a few that are not mentioned by the Nicene Creed. That simple reality should be acknowledged. For a study guide intended to answer the question “What do Anglicans believe?” it is significant that the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, like the other great Protestant confessions, both endorse the Nicene Creed and go beyond it.

Various groups have expressed serious reservations about *Confessing the One Faith*.⁷ Nevertheless, there is much that is very helpful in this

⁴ World Council of Churches, *Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)*, rev. ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), vii.

⁵ The subtitle rightly is more precise in describing it as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381.

⁶ WCC, *Confessing the One Faith*, xxii.

⁷ WEF Theological Commission, *An Evangelical Response to Confessing the One Faith* (Seoul: World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission, 1993), 23: “among other things, the lack of a clear statement about Scripture as the final basis for authority in matters of faith and practice; the lack of a clear commitment to

WCC text, and of particular import is an acknowledgement which goes beyond anything found in *What do Anglicans Believe?* “The affirmations of the Nicene Creed are rooted in the witness of the Holy Scriptures and must be tested against them and explicated in their lights.” On its own this is a helpful and highly significant acknowledgement. However, a final phrase in that sentence muddies the waters: “within the context of the Tradition of the Church.”⁸ This is why the World Evangelical Fellowship responded with the reminder,

It is the Scripture itself, not the way our respective communities interpret the Scripture, that is the norm of what is the faith once for all delivered to the saints. The authority of the Scripture over the traditions of the churches is for us an important methodological principle on which the progress of the dialogue between Christian churches depends greatly.⁹

What do Anglicans Believe? encourages us to study “the core doctrines of the Christian faith in a systematic way.” It is not so much the Nicene Creed itself, but the WCC’s exposition which is the focus of attention. On some articles of the Creed, *Confessing the One Faith* provides a helpful explanation of the doctrine being affirmed with reference to the biblical texts which provide its appropriate anchor. On other articles, though, the treatment is much less satisfactory. The clause “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead” is a case in point. The reality, severity and basis of judgment are all played down by the WCC in a rush to speak of Christ the advocate and to set out a range of opinions about “the time and manner of Christ’s return and judgment” which, it is asserted, reflects a diversity in the New Testament writings themselves.¹⁰ The effect of this in avoiding a serious discussion of sin which would highlight the magnificence of our salvation “from the coming wrath” (1 Thess 1:10) is very significant.

What do Anglicans Believe? does not envisage a critical engagement with the Creed, or the biblical texts adduced in its support. The critical engagement is reserved for the final step in the study, the way it challenges “the lived reality of our church community” (p. 20). Once again, the underlying problem is the lack of a doctrine of Scripture consistent with the Thirty-nine Articles and the first of Cranmer’s homilies.

some important doctrines of the Bible that the church throughout the ages has held dear (e.g., the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, the bodily nature of the resurrection).”

⁸ WCC, *Confessing the One Faith*, xxiii.

⁹ WEF Theological Commission, *An Evangelical Response*, 23.

¹⁰ WCC, *Confessing the One Faith*, 57–58.

What is the Church?

It is not clear why ecclesiology is privileged above other doctrines in this study guide. It moves from the nature of doctrine in general, to a modern explanation of the Nicene Creed, to ecclesiology in its third and final chapter. But in what sense is ecclesiology a central doctrine of Anglican belief? Why not the “once offered, full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world” (*Book of Common Prayer* Communion Service)? Why not the truth that “we are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not for our own works or deservings” (Article 11)? Why not the affirmation that “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever 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 or necessary to salvation” (Article 6)?

The exposition of the doctrine of the church takes a standard treatment of the marks of the church: what it means to be the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. The Thirty-nine Articles are briefly referenced but then swamped by a multitude of other Anglican and ecumenical documents. Bizarrely, the 1662 Ordinal is completely overlooked. And how can the authors possibly justify totally ignoring the documents produced by the Global South, or GAFCON’s *Jerusalem Declaration* (2008) and the *Letter to the Churches* (2018) which address the nature and role of the church in God’s purposes? After all, the signatories to these documents represent by far the majority of Anglican believers worldwide (by a factor of more than 2:1). Instead, the study guide appeals to the “Five Marks of Mission” (p. 25), the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral (p. 27), and the Anglican Covenant (pp. 40–41). These statements, prepared for other purposes, are not carefully enunciated ecclesiological definitions, but are presented in *What do Anglicans Believe?* as constitutive for an Anglican understanding of the church.

Once again, what is missing is a careful account of what the Bible has to say on the subject. There is no biblical theology of God’s gathering purpose; no reflection upon Jesus’s statements about the nature and character of corporate life among his followers, the foundation of the church in the teaching of the apostles and prophets, and their witness to the redemptive purposes of God in Christ; and no treatments of key biblical texts such as the Apostle Paul’s Epistles to the Ephesians and the Corinthians, or his Pastoral Epistles.

It is indicative that the recommendations for further reading should be the WCC’s report *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013), with its problematic confusion of institutional and spiritual unity, and the IASCUFO document *Towards a Symphony of Instruments: A Historical*

and *Theological Consideration of the Instruments of Communion of the Anglican Communion* (2013). At a time when some very good work has been done by Anglicans on the subject of ecclesiology, commending this latter text reveals a concern to define Anglicanism in terms of the institutional structures which have manifestly failed and begun to unravel in the past decade and a half.

Conclusion

Are we given here what the study guide itself claims to offer, namely “a concise and well-grounded introduction to Christian doctrine”? Sadly, we have to conclude “not even close.” Are we given a carefully justified answer to the question in the title, “What do Anglicans believe?” Once again, “not even close.”

The preparation of this study guide represented a golden opportunity to encourage Anglicans to take doctrine more seriously, and to see the vital link between belief and practice, between what God himself has to say to us in his word and how we live as disciples of Christ. A clear and concise summary which helps readers to see the chief contours of Anglican doctrine, and to understand where it is grounded and how it is expressed in our life together, would be very welcome. If being Anglican is simply a mode of being Christian, then it will irrefutably have a great deal in common with Christian thought and practice in other traditions (perhaps even overwhelmingly so). Yet from the beginning the distinctives of Anglican practice had a biblical and theological rationale which remains vital if we are going to “translate” those practices without distortion for a new century. Cranmer’s liturgy and lectionary were meant to transform and nourish a nation, built on his confidence that regular and significant exposure to the Bible read and preached is the instrument the Holy Spirit will use to accomplish this.¹¹ If this alone had been explained simply and concisely it would have been of immense help.

However, as other reviewers have demonstrated, the form of the study guide is unlikely to be useful to those looking for an introduction to Christian doctrine as embraced by Anglicans.¹² It is too densely packed with texts which were written for other purposes and which at points introduce conclusions for which there has been no argument. A number of competing agendas, including the ecumenical agenda and the suggestion of the mutability of doctrine, complicate the picture and confuse the reader.

¹¹ Ashley Null, “Thomas Cranmer and the Anglican Way of Reading Scripture,” *Anglican and Episcopal History*, 75 (2006): 488–526.

¹² Martin Davie, “What Do Anglicans Believe? A Review,” *Reflections of an Anglican Theologian*, 18 August 2020, <https://mbarrattdavie.wordpress.com/2020/08/18/what-do-anglicans-believe-a-review/>.

The low profile of the Thirty-nine Articles, the Homilies, *The Book of Common Prayer* and the Ordinal is inexplicable. Surely each of these must have a central place in attempt to answer the question “What do Anglicans believe?” with reference to Anglican and ecumenical statements. The Thirty-nine Articles are the enduring doctrinal standard of Anglicanism. From the Reformation until recently (and still in some places), those being ordained as Anglicans needed to assent to the Articles *ex animo*. Yet in this study guide the Articles only surface in the midst of a discussion of ecclesiology. The Homilies amongst other things expound the doctrine of the Articles and are themselves referenced in Article 35 as containing “a godly and wholesome doctrine.” *The Book of Common Prayer* was meant as the liturgical embodiment of the doctrine of the Church of England. The Ordinal not only provides the means by which to order ministry, but in its great charges and promises includes majestic statements about the nature and value of the church. The study guide engages with a highly selective collection of Anglican statements, and those representing the vast majority of Anglicans worldwide have simply been ignored.

Most egregious, though, is the absence of reference and appeal to Scripture. If what was said above about liturgy and lectionary holds true, then this raises serious questions about whether we are given anything like a satisfactory answer to the question “What do Anglicans believe?” The questions the study guide encourages us to ask are “What is happening?” “How do these Anglican and ecumenical texts challenge what is happening and open up for us what could be happening?” Yet are these really the questions which we need to address in order to discover what Anglicans believe? If this was to be a genuinely helpful study guide for “home groups, study programmes, seminaries and theological colleges across the Anglican Communion” (p. 5) the question should be that asked repeatedly by the apostle Paul, “What does the Scripture say?” (Rom 4:3).

What do Anglicans Believe? has been sent to Anglican seminaries and theological colleges around the world. But it will not help them. Such colleges should instead be encouraged to immerse themselves in the Scriptures and to make a careful study of the key constituting documents of the English Reformation, the Thirty-nine Articles, the Homilies, *The Book of Common Prayer* and the Ordinal. These will give them a much better answer to the question of what Anglicans believe.

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