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View from Down Under: Authentically Anglican?

Recently as I prepared a sermon about the conversion of Saul I had cause to reflect on Saul's early relationship with the post-Pentecost disciples.

Not surprisingly, having known him as one who "ravaged the church" (Acts 8.3), the disciples were more than a little wary of him. Could it really be that this former persecutor was now himself a follower of the Way?

Four things seem to have conspired to convince them that Saul was an authentic disciple: his own testimony of seeing the risen Lord, his bold proclamation of Jesus as the Christ, his willingness to suffer for the Gospel, and the advocacy of Barnabas (see Acts 9.20-31). Their response is both to allow him to "go in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly" (Acts 9.29) and to deliver him from his persecutors to safety. i.e. they affirmed his apostolic ministry and took him into their fellowship. Writing to the Galatians some 15 or more years later, Paul reflected with gratitude on how the pillars of the church in Jerusalem had given "the right hand of fellowship" to him and Barnabas (Gal 2.9). Clearly Paul was greatly affected by their love and fellowship, and treasured it throughout his life.

Without wanting to suggest any great parallels between our experience and Paul's, we too at WHCC (West Hamilton Community Church) have been greatly affected by the extension of the right hand of fellowship. To be called out on the last day of the Auckland FCA conference and affirmed as "authentically Anglican," and to be told FCANZ stands shoulder to shoulder with us in Gospel ministry, was a huge fillip for us. It may seem a little precious, but when you have been repeatedly discredited by former colleagues and shepherds, accused of not quite ravaging the church but certainly of plundering it, and told you have no right to call yourself Anglican, it means a lot to receive the right hand of fellowship from those whose fellowship you value most. We praise God for the grace extended to us by FCANZ.

While the significance of this was huge for us, it was not lost on those who oppose us either. There have been some strong and hostile reactions.

What seems to have caused most offence is the use of the term "authentic." What does FCANZ mean by claiming itself to be part of a global family of authentic Anglicans, and on what basis is WHCC authentically Anglican?

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Taken in context these are two somewhat different questions. In the case of FCANZ, the challenge is not to its Anglican identity but to the implication that the authenticity of others may be in doubt. If FCANZ is authentically Anglican, who isn't? Is FCANZ suggesting others aren't? If so, whom, and on what basis? And anyway, who is FCANZ to judge?

In the case of WHCC, the primary objection is that it cannot be authentically Anglican so long as it is not a part of the Province of Aotearoa-New Zealand and Polynesia. On this basis submission to General Synod has become the *sine qua non* of being Anglican in this land. Being a part of the global Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans, and its NZ expression, is inconsequential.

In spite of the irony evident in the juxtaposition of these two questions, questions about authenticity are going to continue to be asked and are likely to feature prominently in the consideration of alternative structures to implement Motion 30's "way forward." Before they can be answered though there is going to need to be some agreement on the criteria used to determine just what constitutes authentic Anglicanism.

Is what we believe a criterion? Apparently not. Anglican theologians and clergy have widely disparate beliefs, even on creedal issues. Some freely admit they don't even believe in God.

Is praxis a criterion? Hardly. A low evangelical charismatic Anglican church will bear closer resemblance to a Baptist than a high Anglo-catholic one.

Is polity the defining issue, as some have argued against our claim to Anglican identity? It'd be strange if it were, given that in no other province in the Communion does one have to sign a declaration of submission to the General Synod, i.e. in any other Province, WHCC would still be 'in'. This key aspect of ACANZP's polity may therefore be regarded as an anomaly rather than a defining characteristic (of Anglicanism.) Besides, surely the issue is not so much who signs but who actually submits (cf. Matt 21.28ff.), in which case our claim to authenticity surpasses that of a number of parishes and clergy I can think of. Regardless, does anyone really want to believe that one's baptism, confirmation and ordination within the Anglican church can be negated by the withdrawal of a licence?

It's not hard to think of other possible criteria, but nigh impossible to imagine that there will be any more agreement on what it means to be an

authentic Anglican than there has been on what the Bible says about human sexuality. Inevitably we will divide along the usual party lines.

Equally certain is that the limits of Anglicanism's much-vaunted inclusiveness and tolerance will be sorely exposed.

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Which is why the hallmarks of the authenticity of Saul's conversion are worth holding onto. Membership of a man-made institution is no substitute for a personal conversion to Christ, a clear confession that Jesus is Lord, a readiness to suffer for the biblical gospel, and the fellowship and support of faithful believers.

An Anglicanism without all of these qualities can claim for itself what it likes, but it's simply not authentically Christian.