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EDITORIAL

A Gaff and A Con

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The somewhat bizarre statement of 16 October 2025 by The Most Reverend Dr Laurent Mbanda, the Primate of Rwanda, as Chairman of the GAFCON Primates' Council, in which he claims that they are the legitimate future leaders of the Anglican Communion, is not only foolish but very sadly regrettable for a number of reasons.

Just at the time when a divided and fractured world is in need of the Church of God to be a sign of human unity and peace, Archbishop Mbanda announced the withdrawal of the GAFCON Churches from Communion, not only with the See of Canterbury and the Church of England but with all other Churches of the Anglican Communion which do not similarly join them in breaking this sacred fellowship.

Somewhat confusedly, this withdrawal of Communion is said *not* to be a withdrawal from the Anglican Communion, but the first step in a 're-ordering' of the Anglican Communion, something which one might think is the legitimate task of the Anglican Communion as a whole rather than of a sub-group trying to effect a kind of ecclesiastical coup. The statement hardly qualifies as an expression of Christian charity and mutual respect.

The thinking of the statement is sadly wanting in theological coherence for a number of reasons:

1. First, it mistakenly imagines that the Anglican Communion may be re-ordered with 'only one foundation of communion', namely the Holy Bible. It goes on to allege that the Anglican Communion 'has abandoned the inerrant word of God' which it says therefore has to be 'restored to the heart of the Communion'. This claim to biblical inerrancy is surely wishful thinking.

   Furthermore, it insists that the Bible is to be 'translated, read, preached, taught and obeyed in its plain and canonical sense, respectful of the church's historic and consensual reading'. This is a quotation of GAFCON'S Jerusalem Declaration, Article II, which is said 'to reflect Article VI of the 39 Articles of Religion'.

   When we go to Article VI of the Anglican 39 Articles of Religion, however, it says nothing about the Scriptures being inerrant. Rather, it asserts that the Scriptures 'contain all things necessary to salvation so that whatsoever cannot be read therein, or proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it

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should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.'

Accordingly, the Churches of the Anglican Communion recognize the primary importance of the authority of Scripture in the formulation of Christian doctrine. But this is far from claiming that the Scriptural texts are 'inerrant' or that Biblical inerrancy is somehow 'reflected' in Article VI.

2. Furthermore, there are many things in Scripture that may not necessarily be regarded as 'requisite and necessary for salvation'. It has been traditional for Anglicans to understand that some statements of Scripture may be regarded as things about which we may disagree. While there are certainly things which are to be regarded as required beliefs, there are also things which may be regarded as 'indifferent' with respect to salvation (adiaphora). One of the charisms of the Anglican Communion has been its ability to enjoy the unity of its fellowship in theological diversity.

   The required doctrines that attract our respect as products of the Church's 'historic and consensual reading' are particularly those that have been defined and required of all orthodox Christians in the Credal Statements of historic Christianity. It is very dangerous to suggest that texts whose interpretation is heavily disputed are somehow necessary to salvation or can be held to be required Christian beliefs, let alone the inerrant 'basis of our Communion'.

3. Very importantly, apart from the required beliefs as set out in the Ancient Creeds, the sacred bond of Communion amongst Christians is not primarily grounded in verbal formularies. We are not simply a contractual federation of like-minded people in this sense, nor do we enjoy Communion with one another simply because we all agree on the interpretation of the texts of Scripture.

   Rather, **our communion is not just with one another, but 'with God the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ'** (*I John* 1.3). The 'one basis of our Communion' is not an alleged inerrant reading of some selected texts of Scripture, but the Holy Communion of God the Holy Trinity, in which people of faith are invited to share, and into which they are baptised, and by grace participate. We are not a mere federation but a Communion, precisely because God's love, revealed to us in Christ, has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit **who has been given to us**. (*Romans* 5.5). In other words, the one basis of our Communion is the Communion of God.

4. **This means that deliberately to walk away from the Communion of God, and even worse, to urge others to do so, is a form of apostasy. It is to turn one's back on the Communion of God.**

   This might be overlooked as an inadvertent and unfortunate theological and ecclesial slip, save for the belligerent and self-consciously provocative way in which it has been promulgated. This is very serious indeed.

5. Furthermore, the fundamental doctrines that are required of all Christians, that have been historically and consensually agreed upon, are those of the Christian Creeds of orthodox Christianity which are the product of the ancient Ecumenical Councils of the whole Church.

   Archbishop Mbanda and his GAFCON colleagues mistakenly seem to think that their interpretation of highly disputed texts of Scripture, apparently

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specifically in relation to some selected elements of sexual morality, may be elevated to the status of a test of Christian orthodoxy. While they charge others with a revisionist agenda, this is itself ironically a blatant piece of revisionism that is seriously false.

6. Furthermore, despite its dogmatic certainty with regard to the Scriptural prohibition of same-sex intimacy, along with fornication and adultery, amongst those whom today we term heterosexuals, the statement is silent about the interpretative difficulty posed by the absolute absence from Scripture of any moral advice explicitly to those of homosexual orientation.

   Nor is there any acknowledgement of the fact that this is necessarily so, given that homosexual orientation was a psychological discovery only of the late nineteenth century. Indeed, my Oxford English Dictionary tells me that the word 'homosexual' was first coined for use as recently as 1896. It is understandable why there is no biblical prohibition on people of homosexual orientation 'lying with a woman as they do with a man', for example (echoing *Leviticus* 18.22).

   This means that the challenging work of moral theology remains to be done in the modern world; inevitably, we have to begin our thinking in relation to matters of personal morality with the Biblical exhortation to all human people to be faithful and steadfastly loving in all interpersonal relationships, just as God is always unchangeably faithful and steadfastly loving. But it is indisputable at the moment that, despite the apparent claims of GAFCON leaders already to be in possession of all truth, there is no international or ecumenical consensus with regard to these matters.

   Clearly, what is defined historically and consensually as required belief in orthodox Christianity is the fundamental Trinitarian faith of Christians. That some members of GAFCON profess an essentially Arian belief in 'the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father' while insisting upon their own idiosyncratic requirement of adherence to their own reading of some selected texts of Scripture, many of which are highly disputed, does not add to their credibility.

7. Archbishop Mbanda and his GAFCON colleagues should be urged to repent of what appears to be a theological and ecclesial confidence trick of trying to persuade others to join them in their misguided quest to 're-order' the Anglican Communion. The arrogantly formulated proposals of their statement of October 16 need to be retracted and withdrawn from further circulation.

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