

Dr. Gary Badcock
“ *What is a Communion, anyway?*”

Abstract:

The *Windsor Report* of 2004, which set out to examine the conditions for the possibility of continuing communion amid the strains evident in global Anglicanism, raises challenging questions for the global Church. This paper will argue that these challenges are all the greater for liberal Anglicans in contemporary Canada, since the first principles of contemporary liberal Anglicanism stand in radical tension with the theology of communion as the Windsor Report (rightly) develops it. The contention will be that Canadian Anglicans must learn to think about the nature of ecclesial communion in ways that are more adequately informed by the gospel and by the structures of Christian theology, and less indebted to social theory, if a satisfactory way through the current crisis in the Church is to be found.

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What is a Communion, Anyway?

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Introduction

The Lambeth Commission which reported in *The Windsor Report* of 2004 had the stated goal of seeking a way forward through the current crises in the church that might serve to “encourage communion” within the Anglican Communion.¹ This curious juxtaposition of the problem of encouraging communion *within the Communion* provides the initial occasion for this paper.

Theologically and ecclesologically, the question that arises amid the language used is obvious: what, then, is communion, if communion “within” the Communion is possible, or to be more precise, if its existence within the Communion requires a certain “encouragement”? As we shall see, this apparently innocent little question leads us into deep waters, and takes us to the heart of several issues facing both contemporary global Anglicanism in general, and contemporary Canadian Anglicanism in particular.

The argument of this paper will be that Canadian Anglicans are often ill-equipped to deal with the theological challenges presented by *The Windsor Report*, chiefly because the regulative ecclesiological ideas that are for the most part worked with in the Canadian context are ultimately incommensurate with the demands of a communion of the sort defended in the *Report*. This is not to say, of course, that global Anglicans would have nothing to learn from the Canadian church, or that the Canadian church has nothing to contribute to the global Anglican Communion. What is clear, however, is that the typical ecclesiological standpoint of Canadian Anglicans reaches its limit when confronted by *The Windsor Report*, and that, if the agenda of the latter is to be pursued at all in the Canadian context, a certain re-tooling on the part of Canadian theology and theologians will be required, along with a shift of emphasis on the part of the Canadian church at the pastoral and administrative level. To argue this case, however, requires that we unpack a number of separate arguments, in order finally to return to the question of the nature of communion, and to the demands that a communion ecclesiology such as that envisaged by *The Windsor Report* imposes upon us.

Communion: The Windsor Report

Our starting place must be the theology of *The Windsor Report* itself, which presents as robust an ecclesiology for the Anglican tradition as can perhaps be found in any theological source. Hooker, the classical architect of the Elizabethan ecclesiological settlement, may have provided a foundation (in the principle of royal and parliamentary ascendancy) for church polity that has functioned with tolerable success in the British context over the centuries. His ecclesiology is, however, singularly ill-suited to meet the needs of the diasporic, missionary and politically diverse family of churches that the global Anglican Communion has become, layered as it is in many cases upon cultures and customs that are much older even than Hooker. Historically, it is true, Anglicans have been bound together less by a theology of the church than by a set of liturgical practices represented by the *Book of Common Prayer*; today, however, once again the sheer diversity of liturgical usage in the global church makes the unity founded on the simplicity of Cranmer's liturgical achievement almost entirely redundant. It is, one might say, no accident that the Lambeth Commission on Communion focused in its deliberations on questions of ecclesiology, for what has been exposed in Anglicanism amid the stresses of recent years is the fact that a coherent ecclesiology capable of sustaining the church is frankly wanting. And while *The Windsor Report* could hardly be said in and of itself to provide such a "sustaining" piece of theology, it is clearly a step in this direction, intended to fill a yawning

void as much as to heal a bleeding wound, and structured in such a way as to foster further such development. Whether it will succeed in any sense in meeting these ends remains, of course, to be seen: not least, its fate in part lies in the hands of the Canadian church.

The primary *theological* argument that appears in *The Windsor Report* is of great interest and importance. It is not, however, concerned with those questions of process, order, liturgy, hermeneutics or sexuality that have so consumed pundit and priest alike. The primary *theological* argument of the *Report* appears, rather, in the opening salvo, where the very basis for the existence of the church is delineated in a striking piece of theology that has to date received far too little attention. By beginning in this way, the *Report* renders a singularly important service to the church. For the church, the temptation is always to believe that its function in the world is bound up somehow with this or that program, this or that cause, this or that group of individual or societal needs, or even this or that tradition. This is a “temptation,” I say, because for the church to acquiesce in any or all of these is for it to lose hold of its true identity. “I believe in the church,” we say week by week in one form or another, but what is it exactly about the church that makes it a fitting subject to “believe in,” so that affirmation of the church as a *doctrine* stands alongside the *creedal* affirmation of belief in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

An answer is to be found in the rather elegantly constructed reflections that appear right at the beginning of *The Windsor Report*: the church has its basis in nothing less than the sovereign grace of the triune God who reaches out to the world in Jesus Christ (A, 1-5). Not the least of the advantages of the approach taken is the fact that the doctrine of the church is given real theological status and substance, and yet, with equal clarity, the importance of the church as such is also relativized in the theology presented. God’s plan is for the rescue of “the whole created order,” so that the soteriological context within which ecclesiology is located is literally cosmic in scope. The object of God’s saving action is the world; the church, for its part, exists as “an *anticipatory sign*” of this thing that God is doing. Thus the church is not the *telos* or end of God’s action, but can only be, rather, a witness to it. God’s good purpose is to bring all things into unity in Christ; the unity of the church as an anticipatory sign, therefore, is intended to bear witness to God’s great cause with the world. The ecclesiology of *The Windsor Report* thus provides an escape-route from the obsessional concern with questions of order, politics and practice. It points the church instead to a generous theological position, according to which the life of the church is located in the wider mission of God, and in terms of which the fundamental modalities of the life of the church can be rightly understood in terms of the twin

categories of witness and service. To quote the *Report*: “The unity of the church, the communion of all its members ... and the radical holiness to which all Christ’s people are called, are ... rooted in the trinitarian life and purposes of the one God. They are designed not for their own sake (as though the church’s in-house business were an end in itself), but to serve and signify God’s mission to the world...” [sic] (A, 3).

I spoke a moment ago of the “temptation” faced in so much ecclesiology, to make the church part and parcel of some particular program, or movement, or cause – the danger of which is perhaps obvious when the “movement” in question is as problematic as, say, Nazism or the Apartheid politics of the old South Africa, but far more subtle when the cause served seems more benign. I will return to this problem in due course. There is, for the present, a correlative temptation in ecclesiology that must first be mentioned, and this is the temptation to skip over the kind of thing with which *The Windsor Report* begins, the statement of the location of the church within what I have called the great cause of God with the world, as if it were merely so much *verbiage*: pious, but ultimately vague talk without real content, intended to induce some subjective effect, or at the collective level, a shared sense of *esprit de corps*, rather than as the most serious and indeed *precise* theological talk of all.

To put the same point another, more constructive way, one of the great advantages of *The Windsor Report* is the fact that it begins with the church as a problem of Christian doctrine, or with ecclesiology as a dogmatic theme, rather than with pragmatics or pastoralia. Those who dwell forever on these last, accordingly, will never understand, or indeed sympathize with, the theology of the *Report*. For it must be said that if its opening dogmatic, ecclesiological statements are matters of indifference or irrelevance, then all the rest is a matter of indifference or irrelevance too. It might, of course, be the case that the detailed proposals concerning covenants and instruments of unity and so forth, towards which *The Windsor Report* so relentlessly moves, might be developed in subtly different ways, allowing, for instance, for greater diocesan or provincial autonomy over against the several centralizing emphases of the document (though this may yet come through negotiation, not least from the continent of Africa). What could not be said, however, is that the several ways in which the document seeks to tighten the institutional bonds that cement the Anglican Communion are unrelated to the doctrine of the church that it presents at the outset. The one leads directly to the other.

It is, then, in the final analysis, only because ecclesial communion is such a profound theological theme in the opening sections of *The Windsor Report* that, within it, the possibility of a pragmatic and pastoral tightening up of the affairs of the church can be coherently

attempted. In effect, what the *Report* is arguing is that maintenance of the *status quo*, according to which dioceses and churches can live in virtual isolation, with the exception of those ephemeral exercises in *communion* that take place once a decade at Lambeth, is an insufficient expression of the basic fact that communion structures the very being of the church at the dogmatic level. The existence of the church *in communion*, in short, requires expression in the church's visible structures. Or, to cite *The Windsor Report* once again, "[Communion] is the specific practical embodiment and fruit of the gospel itself" (A, 3), rather than an optional extra that someone or other, fortuitously or otherwise, happens to have bolted on to it externally.

There are two principal things that need be said about this by way of elaboration. The first but not by any means the least is that the theology of *The Windsor Report* stands in continuity with a wide range of ecumenical theology, and with the related emphasis on *communion* that has characterized much constructive ecclesiology over recent decades. One thinks in this connection of the work of the influential Greek theologian-bishop John Zizioulas, who seeks to root the specific approach to ecclesial communion taken in the Christian East in the distinctive emphasis of Eastern trinitarian theology, or of the engagement with ecumenical themes and also with the specific problems of Roman Catholic ecclesiology in the twentieth century found in the ecclesiology of the French Dominican, Yves Congar.² Communion appears at the centre of a series of movements in recent ecclesiology, so that *The Windsor Report's* emphasis on communion – and even, indeed, much of the specific approach to it taken in the document – is far from constituting novel or strange theological territory. Ecclesiologically, *The Windsor Report* is a mainstream document.

The second thing that needs to be said is that, for those with the imagination and ability to pursue it, the theology of communion announced at the beginning of *The Windsor Report* is highly amenable to theological development. This is a theme to which I propose to return at the end of this paper; for the moment, it would suffice to observe that the Canadian church would do well to reflect seriously on the possibilities that lie latent within the theology of communion, more fully developed, and to pay a good deal less attention to the practical and political outcomes envisaged by the *Report*. For the structures that emerge from the process in which the church is engaged are bound to be interpreted in the light of the communion theology that precedes it and underlies it, modified in the light of it, re-conceived, redeveloped, and worked out concretely in relation to particular cases. What the church is, in short, will determine how it is that the church lives. There are those in the Canadian church who have been

sufficiently naive as to suggest that the theological underpinnings of *The Windsor Report* amount to fundamentalism, and therefore that it *ought* to be ignored. This judgment, which has come from people who really ought to know better, conceals a lack of understanding of the possibilities that lie latent within a developed theology of communion for Anglicanism and for the Canadian church. It is high time that this lack of understanding was addressed.

Communion and the Canadian Context

At the beginning of this paper, I made the point that the specific problem that the Anglican Church of Canada faces in relation to *The Windsor Report* is theological through and through. It is, in short, accustomed to ecclesiological thinking that is not readily reconcilable with an ecclesiology of communion, or with an ecclesiology in which communion is truly basic. Undoubtedly, the bitterness of the debates of the 1960s and 1970s over the ordination of women has marked the church in ways that run deeper than the issue of women's ordination as such. Furthermore, the perceived victory of economic and political liberalism in contemporary Western culture over all forms of collectivism and communitarian thought has shaped a generation of clergy and laity alike. We have become such thoroughgoing individualists at the cultural level that it is difficult to conceive of any alternative way.

Both of these factors converge in the promotion of the ideal of "inclusiveness" in the life of the church. Now, to put things in quite this way is certainly not to invite friendly nods and a warm reception at the relevant meetings of the Canadian Learned Societies, or indeed, at synod. Therefore, let me say immediately, paraphrasing the Apostle, that there are varieties of inclusion, but not, alas, the same Lord who works in them all (which reflects, I suggest, around about what Paul really meant to say in 1 Cor. 12: 4-5). The problem arises when and where social inclusion tends to be handled as the comprehensive solution to all human ills, as if the problem of sin itself and as if the divine response of salvation could be dealt with by means of it, and without remainder. There is, as they say, a good deal of this about. In a recent essay on the politics of the United Methodists in the U.S.A., the Irish-American Methodist William J. Abraham complains of the effects of inclusiveness as such a total principle. Undoubtedly, not all of what has been done in the name of inclusion is a bad thing, but the fact is, Abraham argues, that the outcome of inclusiveness as a all-embracing principle is not at all compatible with inclusion, since its effect to incite a binary rejection of any alternative vision — and of all those who espouse it.³ The movement, despite the stated goal of "inclusiveness," in other words, is actually incompatible with it. We have arrived at a situation in which anyone who

dares so much as to cough when pondering the worth of the inclusiveness “audits” of mainline religion faces immediate branding as a racist, sexist, or homophobic, and as some of us know all-too-well, to be branded as any of these is definitively *not* to be “included.” Abraham writes, “What has happened overall is that a virulent form of moralism has poisoned the church” (p.138), and goes on to plead the case for a theologically informed “cynicism” in face of it (p.140). What has occurred is the substitution for the gospel of a theologically impoverished, and highly individualistic account of the human good.

The allegation of individualism will be a controversial one, but Abraham’s contention is, I would suggest, entirely defensible. Despite the perception that the ideal of inclusion authentically represents previous radical social movements in modernized form, the fact is that inclusiveness as a principle of social thought is possible only in a thoroughly liberal – or, to be more accurate, neo-liberal society. The British political and economic theorist John Gray, for instance, has argued that it is precisely because economic globalization has made the central goals of older forms of social democracy unattainable that the old political Left has effectively disappeared (*e.g.*, as in the case of Tony Blair’s “New Labour”).⁴ Politicians on the “Left” today seek electoral advantage by promoting the goal of social inclusion as opposed to the redistribution of wealth. What redistributive policies such as full employment were to the traditional Left, in other words, the idea of inclusiveness is to the neo-liberalism of the past two decades. There are, as Gray argues, areas of overlap between the two, but there are also clear and rather large areas of radical divergence. Among them is the fact that “inclusiveness” is not in and of itself an egalitarianism, for as we can readily see, it is as necessary for the inclusiveness agenda that some be *excluded* from power and privilege as it is that some be granted it.

At the heart of neo-liberal inclusiveness, in fact, there stands a paradoxical idealism. On the one hand, the social goal expressed in inclusion is one of belonging: all ought to have access to those activities and services that are central to a society – or, to use the contemporary shorthand, all have equal “rights.” Yet one of the conditions of neo-liberal society is found in the *erosion* of community and of communal identity amidst an all-pervasive individualism. Mediated largely through the mass culture, its impact has universally been the submerging of local cultural identities, including religious identity, and as a consequence, the loosening of traditional social bonds. The ideal of inclusiveness merges neatly with the mass culture, and like it, serves as an instrument by which older forms of collective identity are chipped away. Its message is one of the dignity of the individual, indeed, but of that

individual as abstracted from all the social relations in which he or she stands, precisely so that a world in which individuals matter supremely can be formed. From the economic standpoint, each individual is now a consumer; from the political standpoint, and for the sake of this same principle, each person in society must stand in the same relation to everyone else. There can be no discrimination, but equally, there can be no recognition of “rights” belonging to anything other than individuals: the institutions of family and religion, for instance, have no rights, and in the strict constitutional sense no fundamental status in law; they exist only insofar as individuals have “rights” to them. It is individuals, defined in this way, who are to be included – and for the sake of this goal the rejection of older patterns of social behaviour, citizenship, kinship, and sexual role (i.e., all traditional identity) is presented as a moral necessity. In the gospel according to neo-liberalism, only radical individuals, freed from such constraints, will find the path to personal wholeness.

Whether genuine political community can be brought into existence from such sources is highly debatable, as experience of contemporary culture and especially of contemporary geopolitical turmoil abundantly reveal. Those most formed by it today are youth, who are also the least likely to vote and to participate in political, civic and religious institutions (since after all, there are only individuals, and institutions therefore are matters of moral indifference). Geopolitically, neo-liberalism is today an imperious global force, literally at war with much that stands against it. In the church, theological adaptations of neo-liberal values entails, with a ruthless logical consistency, the core, theologically self-destructive assertion that in Christianity, there are no strictly theological claims that matter, since these are of only subsidiary importance. Individuals and their needs alone matter. This is not a soil on which an ecclesiology of communion can easily grow, and it is very much to the credit of the holistic cultural vision of our African brothers and sisters, among others, that they can see this simple fact a mile off.

To put this in concrete terms, the broad tendency in Canadian Anglicanism today is to highlight the idea of community, but it is community of a very particular sort: community exists, it might be said, where each individual is recognized and affirmed for who she or he is, and where no one person is left behind. Now this is, in many of its expressions, laudable and good. What it is not, however, is an understanding of the life of the church that is compatible with the theology of communion presented at the beginning of *The Windsor Report*, where God’s concern is the world, and where the world is treated, not as a community of affirming and affirmed individuals, but rather, as a people who live in unity and so bear witness to God’s

purpose to renew all things in the one name of Jesus Christ. From the standpoint of the theology of communion found in *The Windsor Report*, it scarcely matters whether any unique individual, anywhere, has ever existed: so far is the very foundation of liberal polity excluded from the sphere of the *communio* of the kingdom.

Communion: A Theological Response

In the gallery of potential and actual responses to *The Windsor Report* that might appear and that do appear in the Canadian context, there are three that stand out and present themselves for special consideration. The first and most obvious alternative is simply for the Canadian church to “tough it out,” adopting as its *mantra* the principle that inclusion *is* the gospel,⁵ and (ironically) the devil take those who do not agree. There are, it would seem, a sizable number of people in the church who appear to favour this route – though its consequence will certainly be schism internationally, and probably schism on the national level as well. Paradoxically, however, the longer-term impact of this kind of policy would likely be the end of the ecclesiology of inclusion, since an ecclesiology that fails the church so spectacularly must finally be recognized as one not worth having.

In the middle, perhaps, there is the option of a more studied perseverance, retaining a little here and granting a little there, in the hope that all manner of things will be well in the end and that the nightmare must finally be over when morning comes. As an external observer, I must confess that this appears to me to be the substance of the policy of the national church, and it may yet be successful in retaining much of the church’s membership, assets, and relationships, and in avoiding overwhelming damage. What it is not, however, is a highly principled or theologically convincing response to the crisis we face, and for this reason, I wish to explore and commend a third alternative.

The third option is to proceed by way of a measured endorsement and acceptance of *The Windsor Report*. Crucially, however, any such stance should be subject to the qualification that the theology of communion with which the *Report* begins and with which it seeks to work be more fully explored, and certainly that it be more fully explored before the prescriptive measures which are recommended in it are implemented in detail. This response, I suggest, offers several important advantages over the others.

First of all, by no means the least of its advantages is that it would effectively put an end to the “inclusion is the gospel” mantra mentioned earlier, by recognizing that, in face of the demands of ecclesiological communion on the global level, such commitment to social

inclusion is so identifiably Western and so obviously a child of political liberalism that it is incommensurate with continued existence in a global church. To use the language employed earlier, the gospel of inclusion has reached its limit when confronted by *The Windsor Report*, and to recognize this is merely to read, mark, and inwardly digest a kind of empirical fact. One way or another, in Anglican theology, its day as the answer to all human ills is about to end.

Secondly, however, exploration of the meaning of the church as a communion will be necessary if ever anything of *The Windsor Report* becomes normative in global Anglicanism. The treatment of the theme in the *Report* itself is too thin theologically to sustain the church amid the strains that must inevitably arise in future years. In particular, the question arises how much diversity is compatible with communion. For the Canadian church, I wish to suggest, this is a *crucial* question, and it would be well for it to be part of this debate from the beginning.

Finally, and by way of elaboration of the last point, it is of very considerable significance that the ideal of communion represented in *The Windsor Report* is grounded in the outreach of the *triune* God to the world. What is almost wholly undeveloped in the *Report*, however, is the notion that the unity of God which exists in the mystery of the divine Trinitarian life creates a kind of theological space within which it is not only possible, but positively necessary, to account also for difference. In this space, it becomes possible for even the Canadian church, not merely despite its “difference,” but in a real sense because of it, to exist in communion.

There are a number of ways in which it would be possible, in principle, to flesh this out; I will choose only one, taken from the theology of the great Karl Barth, who more than any other single Christian theologian, has placed the problems and possibilities of Trinitarian theology on the agenda for us today. In the context of his treatment of the doctrine of God in *Church Dogmatics* volume II, Barth develops the fascinating argument that God is capable of being present to and in the world precisely because, in his own Trinitarian being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God is already present to himself.⁶ There is, in short, relationality in God, relationality of a sort that demands of us a recognition that there exists in the unity of the divine life a “here” and a “there,” a “first” and a “second,” an “I” and a “Thou.” Rather than existing beyond all limitation, God in infinite freedom exists in the eternal self-limitation of love, according to which there is distance and otherness as well as proximity and sameness in the one God. The unity of God as Trinity is not monolithic and lifeless, but something that embraces difference, and that is therefore – thanks be to God – capable of embracing the difference also of the creature. For it is in the assumption of human nature by God in Jesus

Christ, and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, by which we are made the dwelling-place of God, that the creature also is drawn not only into unity *with* God, but into those relations that constitute the trinitarian unity *of* God.

A fully Trinitarian theology of communion is well beyond the scope of the present argument, though certainly not beyond the scope of the present problem. What its elaboration might cause us to recognize, however, in the context of the wider reception of *The Windsor Report* is that the church has good reason to avoid the seemingly less troublesome, less messy route of positing a single hierarchical structure in which all difference is ironed out. What we must favour theologically is a unity that not only allows for, but actually presupposes difference. Otherness is as primordial as the one being of God: this is the message of trinitarian theology.

Even more, the outreach to the world of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, spans a bottomless moral and metaphysical abyss in order to reconcile all things to himself. The church, as the product of this initiative and as the people that lives by bearing witness to it, needs for its part again and again to learn how to echo such generosity in its own structures and in its own communion. Here, in short, there is plenty for the church to be occupied with theologically, pastorally and politically. Here too, a series of structures are provided, not by some critical or political theory, but by the nature of God and the very character of the gospel itself, which is thus seen to have the potential not only to reconcile, but also to renew the church in its present confusion – and yes, even to provide a home for neo-liberal Canadians in an Anglican Communion built on richer theological foundations.

¹The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *The Windsor Report* (London: The Anglican Communion Office, 2004), p. 5.

² John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), and, among many works, Yves Congar, *Diversity and Communion*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1984).

³ William J. Abraham, "Inclusivism, Idolatry and the Survival of the (Fittest) Faithful," in Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier, eds., *The Community of the Word* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press and Leicester: Apollos, 2005), pp. 131-145.

⁴ John Gray, "Inclusion: A Radical Critique," in Peter Askonas and Angus Stewart, eds., *Social Inclusion* (Houndmills: MacMillan Press Ltd., and New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 2000), pp. 19-36.

⁵“Justice is orthodoxy,” which is a comparative slogan, also merits comment. The trouble with it is that the question, “Whose justice?” is just as acute as the question, “What orthodoxy?” For the concept of “justice” means nothing apart from an assumed framework within which, or in terms of which, moral meaning can be accorded to human life, and to the varied relations in which people stand in the social order. Much of the self-evidence that attaches to the “justice is orthodoxy” slogan in the minds of contemporary activists derives from the conviction with which neo-liberal ideas about the primacy of the human individual are embraced, for the sake of which all that stands in the way of the individual’s flourishing must be rejected as oppressive. But how such a doctrine of theological justice relates to the justice of God, which in scripture, *e.g.*, grounds the justification of the ungodly through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, would need to be shown long before the “justice is orthodoxy” principle could be taken seriously in a properly developed theology. As it stands, the principle looks worryingly like the sacralization of a very particular social ideology, rather than like a properly *theological* position at all.

⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, trans. T.H.L. Parker *et al.*; ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), §31, esp. pp. 461ff.