

Section II: A Unified Approach to Scripture

General Hermeneutical Principles

One of the greatest barriers to the successful discussion of any issue is the failure to establish common understandings for terms and concepts that are key the discussion. The College of Bishops voted to accept these principles as their official guidelines for how Scripture can be understood and used appropriately in these discussions. Both this list and the summary that follows were approved by the College of Bishops on June 20th, 2013.

- *Scripture is the inspired Word of God.*
- *Scripture has authority over the Church.*
- *The Church is the servant of Scripture as its witness and keeper.*
- *Redemption in Christ is the central theme in Scripture.*
- *Scripture is coherent; one part can interpret another without doing violence to its overall integrity.*
- *Scripture is to be read with reference to the Church and as received by the Church.*
- *The books of Scripture display various genres and have their own cultural and linguistic contexts.*
- *Scripture has an original as well as a present audience.*

A Summary of Hermeneutical Principles Drawn from the Foundational Documents of the ACNA

Abbreviations:

<i>ACNA</i>	<i>The Constitution of the Anglican Church in North America</i>
<i>JD</i>	<i>The Jerusalem Declaration</i>
<i>Articles</i>	<i>The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1571)</i>
<i>BCP</i>	<i>The Book of Common Prayer (1662)</i>

1. “We confess the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired Word of God, containing all things necessary for salvation, and to be the final authority and unchangeable standard for Christian faith and life.”(ACNA 1, cf. JD 2, Articles 6, 20, 21)

Scripture is our starting point. It is not just another ancient text; it is the word of God, and holds authority over the Church and its members. It not only teaches and reveals the way to salvation, it also provides guidance for daily life.

2. “The Bible is to be translated, read, preached, taught and obeyed in the plain and canonical sense, respectful of the Church's historic and consensual reading” (JD 2)

The Word of God is able to address us plainly; we should not approach the text with a hermeneutic of suspicion. Individual passages of Scripture, including the more obscure or challenging, are rightly understood in the context of the books in which they are found and in light of the Bible as a whole.

The Church's historical and consensual understanding of the Bible must be taken seriously when interpreting and explaining Scripture. New understandings of the Bible's meaning (for example, as a result of new understanding of the original language or new insights into its cultural context) should be weighed in light of the Church's historic wisdom.

3. “The Old Testament is not contrary to the New for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ, who is the only mediator between God and man.” (Article 7)

Both the Old and New Testaments are authoritative in matters pertaining to salvation; the central theme of both Testaments is salvation, redemption in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament is key to a full understanding of God's redemptive activity, which centers on Jesus; it is not merely historical background.

4. “Although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching ceremonies and rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth, yet notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral” (Article 7)

Although the Bible is a coherent whole, certain practices described in the Old Testament are no longer binding on Christians. Such for example were the ceremonial laws governing the sacrifices in the Temple, which have been fulfilled by Our Lord's death on Calvary. Such likewise were the civil laws governing the people of Israel, like the provision of "cities of refuge." However, the moral commandments, principles and teachings of the Old Testament were affirmed and clarified by the New, and continue in force as the standard for our daily life.

5. "Although the Church be a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ...so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of salvation" (Article 20, cf. Article 21 regarding General Councils... "things ordained by them as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be **declared that they be** taken out of holy Scripture" and Article 6, "...whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be received by any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.").

Scripture stands in authority above the Church; therefore, the Church must not enforce or assert anything that is not in Scripture as being necessary for Salvation. At the same time, the Church is the witness to and keeper of the Bible and is "the pillar and ground of truth" (1 Tim 3:15). As such, it provides the context in which the Scriptures are rightly read and interpreted.

6. "The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith; and yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree any thing against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of Salvation (Article 20).

The Church has authority to alter rites and ceremonies and to rule in theological and moral areas not strictly necessary to Salvation, where the faithful have disagreed. The Church may not use its authority in a way which could require its people to believe or to act in a manner contrary to Scripture.

7. "... it is but reasonable, that upon weighty and important considerations, according to the various exigency of times and occasions, such changes and alterations should be made [in rites and ceremonies], as to those that are in place of Authority should from time to time seem either necessary or expedient" (BCP, Preface)

The Church may and sometimes must initiate change pertaining to certain aspects of our worship and polity which do not deal specifically with Salvation or morality. No alterations should be made lightly or without considering the needs and concerns of the Church in the current situation and culture. While such changes do not have to find reference in the specific teaching of Scripture, they may never contradict it.

8. "We confess as proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture the historic faith" (or JD, 'the rule of faith') "of the undivided church as declared by the three Catholic Creeds: the Apostles', the Nicene and the Athanasian" (ACNA 4, cf. JD 3, Article 8.)

Any interpretation of Biblical passages should align with the affirmations of the three Catholic Creeds in matters of theology and morality, because in them the Church teaches the historic faith found in Scripture. In other words, the Creeds summarize the rule of Faith found in Holy Scripture; therefore, they are a sure guide for our interpretation of what Scripture teaches.

9. “We uphold the Thirty-Nine Articles as containing the true doctrine of the Church agreeing with God's word and as authoritative for Anglicans today.” (JD 4) cf. “We receive the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of 1571, taken in their literal and grammatical sense, as expressing the Anglican response to certain doctrinal issues controverted at that time, and as expressing fundamental principles of authentic Anglican belief.” (ACNA 7)

The Articles remain an authoritative document for Anglicans, agreeing with God's Word and setting the boundaries for its interpretation and use. They are to be understood and interpreted in light of the doctrinal issues and controversies that were prevalent at the time they were formulated.

10. “We celebrate the God-given diversity among us which enriches our global fellowship, and we acknowledge freedom in secondary matters. We pledge to work together to seek the mind of Christ on issues that divide us” (JD 12) cf. “so that all things be done to edifying” (Article 34).

Our interpretation of Scripture should be done in a spirit of love and humility, with prayer and diligence, in recognition of and delight in the diversity of our global fellowship. While allowing freedom in secondary issues, we are called together to seek the mind of Christ in divisive issues.