

# Faith and Doctrine in the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia

*A Report of the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission*

On 9 July, 2020, Archbishop Glenn Davies sent the following request to the chairman and secretary of the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission: “It occurred to me that, given the Wangaratta submission to the Appellate Tribunal has tried to make a distinction between faith and doctrine, in terms of the Constitution, there would be value in the Doctrine Commission’s reflection upon the merits of such a distinction.” The following report is the result of that reflection.

## Introduction

1. Part I of The Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia (1961) begins with three Fundamental Declarations (Chapter I) and three Ruling Principles (Chapter II). The function of the Fundamental Declarations is to protect the essential elements of the Christian Faith, declaring such elements to be foundational to Australian Anglicanism. The Ruling Principles further declare that the Anglican Church of Australia (ACA) retains and approves the historical standards of doctrine and worship of the Church of England as the norm for all future development. This short report explores what is meant in the Constitution by ‘faith’ and ‘doctrine’.

## Faith

2. Although ‘faith’ is most commonly used in the Scriptures to refer to personal trust or belief, it is occasionally used with reference to that which is believed (i.e., the *content* of faith). For example, Paul narrates the report that ‘The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching *the faith* he once tried to destroy’ (Gal 1:23). Luke recalls that as the word of God spread in Jerusalem ‘a large number of priests became obedient to *the faith*’ (Acts 6:7; see also Acts 13:8; 14:22; 16:5). Paul tells Timothy that deacons must keep hold of ‘the deep truths of *the faith* with a clear conscience’ (1 Tim 3:9). Jude urges his readers to ‘contend for *the faith* that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people’ (Jude 1:3). In each of these cases ‘the faith’ equates to essential Christian proclamation and teaching.
3. Section 1 of the Fundamental Declarations uses ‘the Christian Faith’ in a way that is resonant with this scriptural use. Its meaning cannot be reduced to the barest essentials of Christian teaching, nor is it exhausted by the Creeds. For if the Christian faith is that which is ‘in particular’ set forth in the Creeds, it cannot be reducible to the Creeds. This is further clarified in Section 2, where what is taught concerning the nature of the Scriptures is not explicit in the Creeds but is nevertheless affirmed as a tenet of the Christian Faith. Therefore, this Faith is declared to be that which has been ‘professed by the Church of Christ from primitive times’ (Section 1).
4. Section 2 of the Fundamental Declarations recognises that the rule and standard of this faith is the canonical Scriptures. This Section clearly alludes to and affirms

Article VI of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*: ‘Holy Scripture contains 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’.

5. Read in the light of Article VI, ‘the faith’ in the Constitution of the ACA means the things that are provable by Scripture and, therefore, such things as ought to be required to be believed as articles of the faith. This, as we have seen, is broader in scope than either the Creeds or merely the doctrine of salvation narrowly considered. The Article aims to establish the sufficiency of Scripture for the whole of the Faith.
6. Section 74 (1) of the Constitution further affirms that ‘faith includes the obligation to hold the faith’. In this way, both corporate and personal faith are brought alongside the faith so defined. The corporate and personal faith of the members of the ACA must be in the Christian faith as defined in the canonical Scriptures.

### **Doctrine**

7. Faith, doctrine and obedience are closely linked in the Scriptures. In 1 Timothy 1:10-11, ‘sound doctrine’ is that which conforms to the gospel. Obedience also flows from and is consistent with sound doctrine. So, among other things, sexual immorality, practising homosexuality, slave trading and lying are described as ‘contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel’. Later in 1 Timothy, Paul warns against anyone who ‘teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness’ (1 Tim. 6:3). In Romans 6:17, the ‘pattern of doctrine’ believers have received defines the moral choices they are to make as they live new lives set free from sin. Obedience is inseparable from the ‘sound doctrine’ that is ‘in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God’ (1 Tim. 1:11).
8. In Section 3 of the Fundamental Declarations, the Constitution commits the ACA to ‘ever obey the commands of Christ’, to ‘teach His Doctrine’, and to order the life of the Church accordingly, following and upholding ‘His discipline’. This reference to Christ’s doctrine is synonymous with ‘the Christian Faith’, as defined above.
9. In summary, ‘the Christian Faith’, the Scriptures as ‘the ultimate rule and standard of faith’ and ‘His [Christ’s] doctrine’ are three different ways of referring to the same reality. As these expressions are all embedded in the Fundamental Declarations, the reality to which they refer is constitutionally unchangeable.
10. In the Ruling Principles, Section 4 locates the source of the doctrine of this Church in the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. Section 74 (2) further clarifies that this means the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* (inclusive of The Ordinal).
11. This doctrine is particularly and historically Anglican, although it must always be consistent with ‘the Christian Faith’, the canonical Scriptures and Christ’s doctrine. The doctrine of the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Articles provide the Anglican Church of Australia with its long held and commonly agreed answers to questions raised by the Faith. Section 74 (1) defines doctrine as ‘the teaching of this Church

on any question of faith'. Furthermore, in Section 74 (4), it is clarified that 'unless the context or subject matter otherwise indicates, any reference to faith shall extend to doctrine'. Therefore, it is not possible to play off 'faith' and 'doctrine' against each other in either the Scriptures or the Constitution of the ACA.

12. The doctrine of this Church, as expressed in the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Articles, is a Ruling Principle rather than a Fundamental Declaration. As such, it is in theory revisable, so long as such revisions are 'consistent with the Fundamental Declarations' and do not 'contravene any principle of doctrine or worship' in the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Articles (Section 4). Any revision must be proved from the canonical Scriptures and so accord with the doctrine of Christ.

### **Conclusion**

13. The Constitution commits the ACA to the Christian Faith of the Catholic Church, which is the doctrine of Christ as expressed in the canonical Scriptures. The doctrine of the ACA is grounded in an affirmation of the doctrinal statements embodied in the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Articles, which make explicit the relationship between faith, doctrine and obedience for Australian Anglicans.

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