

ISSUES FACING ECUMENISM

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I want to focus on three issues facing ecumenism today and to use lenses familiar to me as an Anglican and familiar to you as well. The three lenses are scripture, tradition, and reason – the sources from which Anglicans have attempted to discern God’s truth. I believe the way we “handle” those three sources, and how we deal with those who handle them differently, will eventually determine the future of our little Anglican experiment and also the future of the ecumenical enterprise.

How do we read and understand scripture? What weight do we give to “the” Tradition (with a “capital t”) and how much of that Tradition are we really willing to listen to? What place does the uniquely human faculty of “reason” have to play in all of this? Since I know you would be disappointed if an Episcopal bishop did not speak about sex, I will look at our church’s struggles around homosexuality through those three lenses because this is not only an issue for us, but for the whole church and therefore for the ecumenical movement.

For the sake of brevity and because they summarize decades (and even centuries) of ecclesiological thinking yet because they are also quite contemporary, I shall cite two main texts: The Lambeth Commission’s 2004 work on Communion entitled *The Windsor Report* and the Episcopal Church’s formal response to that report which we called *To Set Our Hope on Christ*.

Scripture

All Christian communions emphasize “the authority of scripture.” However, as *The Windsor Report* points out: “...the common phrase ‘the authority of scripture’ can be misleading...Scripture itself, after all, regularly speaks of *God* as the supreme authority. When Jesus speaks of ‘all authority in heaven and earth’ (Matthew 28:18), he declares that this authority is given, not to the books that his followers will write, but to himself. Jesus, the living Word, is the one to whom the written Word bears witness as God’s ultimate and personal self-expression. The New Testament is full of similar ascriptions of authority to the Father, to Jesus Christ, and to the Holy Spirit. Thus the phrase ‘the authority of scripture’ if it is to be based on what scripture itself says, must be regarded as a shorthand, and a potentially misleading one at that, for the longer and more complex notion of ‘the authority of the triune God, exercised through scripture’.”¹

“The current crisis,” *The Windsor Report* goes on to say of the contemporary situation in Anglicanism (and I would submit, also in many ecumenical situations) “constitutes a call...to re-evaluate the ways in which we have read, heard, studied and digested scripture. We can no longer be content to drop random texts into arguments, imagining that the point is thereby proved, or indeed to sweep away sections of the New Testament as irrelevant to today’s world, imagining that problems are thereby solved. We need

mature study, wise and prayerful discussion, and a joint commitment to hearing and obeying God as he speaks in scripture, to discovering more of the Jesus Christ to whom all authority is committed, and to being open to the fresh wind of the Spirit who inspired scripture in the first place.”²

Statements such as this, of course, invite the American authors of *To Set Our Hope on Christ* (which is a response to *The Windsor Report*) to point out that “there has been considerable debate and discussion within both Judaism and Christianity about how to interpret the biblical texts that forbid same-sex relations. There are faithful scholars in both traditions who say that what the texts forbid is clear and that it applies today as it always did. On the other hand, there are faithful scholars in both traditions who believe that what the biblical texts describe is not as clear as it first appears and does not clearly apply in a very different cultural context. Because the contextual situation of Leviticus, for example, is so different from our own, it would be inaccurate to assume that some of its texts are more binding on us today than all the other of its proscriptions that we, in fact, do not any longer follow.”³

So, discussions on the “authority of scripture” become inevitably discussions about the “interpretation of scripture.” And the next question becomes, as the night follows the day, “who” interprets it? It is precisely here – in our current discussion within the Anglican Communion and so often in our ecumenical dialogues across the board -- that we begin to hold up for consideration the second lens. Tradition. How have the biblical texts been handled by the tradition? How have they been “traditionally” understood? And who gets to decide what “tradition” prevails?

Tradition

Interestingly (and some would say, predictably) in *The Windsor Report* the section on “Scripture and interpretation” is followed directly by a section entitled “The episcopate.” After a brief excursus on the English reformers decision to retain episcopacy as the form of church government and its preservation in all thirty-eight Provinces of the Anglican Communion today, the authors point out that “it is the bishop’s role as teacher of scripture that is meant, above all, to be not merely a symbolic but a very practical means of giving the Church the energy and direction it needs for its mission and therefore the motivation and the groundwork for its unity.”⁴

Not that all bishops have a completely magisterial function. For example, “the Anglican Communion is thus bound together in a variety of ways, with scripture as the constant factor, the historic episcopate, the Instruments of Unity, and the synodical life of the Church as the practical means of living together under scripture, and with discernment and reception as the modes in which the Communion operates in relation to new proposals and the emergence of differences.”⁵

Surely this is true across the wide spectrum of Christian communions today. The balance falls in different places with respect to the ministry of bishops, pastors, seminary faculties, synodical bodies of all kinds each of whom has a variety of roles to play in the interpretation of scripture and the discernment of God’s truth from age to age.

“...one way in which unity has been maintained is by subjecting fresh developments within the Anglican Communion to a test of *reception*. In classic theological terms, ‘reception’ was the process by which the pronouncements of a Council of the Church were tested by how the faithful ‘received it.’ The *consensus fidelium* (‘common mind of the believers’) constituted the ultimate check that a new declaration was in harmony with the faith as it has been received. More recently, the doctrine has been used in Anglicanism as a way of testing whether a controversial development, not yet approved by a universal Council of the Church but nevertheless arising within a province by legitimate processes, might gradually, over time, come to be accepted as an authentic development of the faith.”⁶

Again, the authors of *To Set Our Hope on Christ* suggest at least two examples of such a reception process. In the first, they offer “a reading of Acts 10-15, telling how early Christians came to believe that since God had already welcomed Gentiles and had poured out the Holy Spirit upon them, the followers of Jesus should welcome Gentiles into the Church without requiring them to become Jewish. The experience of one part of the Church (Peter and his companions) initially seemed to be in direct contradiction to God’s word in Scripture and to the Church’s present practices, so Peter and the others were rightly invited to explain themselves to the rest of the Church. As they told their stories to one another, and as they listened to one another with respect and patience, they reached an agreement that the Holy Spirit really was leading the Church – at first, part of the Church and, then, later, most of the Church – to include Gentiles as Gentiles and to welcome Gentiles as leaders of the Church.”⁷

Later, in *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, the authors seek “to describe the theological developments, over nearly four decades, by which some members of the Episcopal Church came to perceive (a) holiness in the lives of its members of same-sex affection, and (b) the potential for their covenanted unions to be open for God’s blessing. In no way do we wish to minimize the sea-change in our understanding that this has represented. Indeed, we have only been able to conceive of what God might be doing in our midst by allowing the light of Holy Scripture to shine upon our experience and guide us to the living Word of truth. Thus have we prayed, and caught sight (in the Book of Acts) of Jesus’ early followers struggling to understand the scarcely unimaginable wideness of God’s mercy...to overcome the most basic differences among members of the human family for the sake of a new and redeemed creation.”⁸

Probably most Christians would agree that ongoing revelation, discernment of God’s truth, and eventual reception of a new reality were operative in the case of the early Church’s inclusion of the Gentiles. Far fewer would agree today that the same process is at work in the Episcopal Church’s decisions with respect to gay and lesbian persons and their place in the Church. Perhaps this is the place to ask what role “reason” plays in all of this.

Reason

In Anglicanism, reason does not merely mean “the capacity for logical, rational, and analytic thought”⁹ but “most fundamentally, reason is the capacity to think and talk about things – a fairly basic endowment of human beings, and one which seems to have a role

in all kinds of human behavior, not excluding religion...Reason is not to be identified simply with highly abstract and specialized activities like calculation or the construction of logical proofs of various sorts...Reason is not less at work in musing and imagining, in reflective appreciation, and in purposive action. It is reason, after all, which sees and formulates the difference between ‘the God of the philosophers and the living God’ – and which knows that faith does not work in exactly the same way as scientific inquiry... Faith alienated from reason would not be faith at all; for it would be blind and could not make sense.”¹⁰

Reason, in this context, is understood in a classical sense as in Plato and Aristotle, as what might be called “participatory knowledge.” To know something is to experience it, to participate in something. At least this is the way Richard Hooker, the late 16th century Anglican divine, would have understood it – as practical wisdom which informs and is informed by scripture and tradition. As such, what we are talking about here is “Spirit guided” wisdom.

The Windsor Report, in this writer’s view, does not give enough attention to the role of “reason” in classical Anglicanism. Scripture and tradition stand almost alone in this text as ways of discerning God’s truth. However, in a section entitled “Discernment in communion and reception,” the authors do point out that “As the whole Church, corporately and individually, gives attention to the reading and pondering of scripture, we are called to the specific unifying task of a common *discernment in communion*. We come from a rich variety of cultures, and each of us is called to read scripture within, and apply it to, our own particular setting – and to respect the fact that other churches face the same demands within their contexts.”

“We cannot, therefore confine our readings of scripture to our own setting alone...On the contrary, one of the ways in which we discern the limits of appropriate inculturation is by our rendering account to one another, across traditional boundaries, for the gospel we proclaim and the teaching we offer. One of the hallmarks of healthy worldwide communion will be precisely our readiness to learn from one another...”¹¹

Applying this human (and divine) faculty of reason to the process of discernment prompts the authors of *To Set Our Hope on Christ* to offer these reflections when considering biblical texts on homosexuality, “Part of our discernment process, as we engage with any text of Holy Scripture, involves a thoughtful consideration of the contexts of the biblical writers and of ourselves. Is our situation like the situation of the biblical writers? Does a given biblical commandment or prohibition speak clearly to our own context?”

“The question will be helpful as we look at the biblical passages that prohibit same-sex relations. It seems very likely that there was no phenomenon in the time of the biblical writers directly akin to the phenomenon of Christians of the same gender living together in faithful and committed lifelong relationships as we experience this today. We most devoutly wish to stress the difference between this statement we are making – that our cultural context is different from that of a given biblical writer’s context – and another statement that we sometimes hear but would emphatically disavow, ‘we today know better than the biblical writers.’”

“On the contrary, we affirm the wisdom and holiness of the Scriptures and assume, most gratefully, that we are to be instructed by them. Yet not every biblical norm is directly relevant to every situation in our own time. Discernment is required, through the direction of the Holy Spirit, in order to ascertain the Lord’s will for us in every time and to follow in faith where Christ has led the way.”¹²

In other words, reason (Spirit guided wisdom) is necessary for us to understand and appropriate both scripture and tradition. However, in order for these three streams, and sources of authority, to interact, to engage one another, indeed to correct for one another, there must be an environment, a container, if you will, inside of which the conversation can take place.

The Body of Christ

That container is, of course, the Body of Christ. A great Episcopal ecumenist, William Reed Huntington, first proposed the four “walls” of that container – something which eventually came to be known as the Lambeth Quadrilateral:

- “(a) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as ‘containing all things necessary to salvation,’ and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.
- (b) The Apostles’ Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.
- (c) The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself – Baptism and the Supper of the Lord – ministered with unfailing use of Christ’s words of institution, and of the elements ordained by Him.
- (d) The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called by God into the Unity of His Church.”¹³

The Windsor Report – itself citing the International Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission’s “Communion Study” -- suggests how these basic ingredients can be lived out: “The Lambeth Quadrilateral commits Anglicans to ‘a series of normative practices: scripture is *read*, tradition is *received*, sacramental worship is *practiced*, and the historic character of apostolic leadership is *retained*.”¹⁴

“Through such communion, each church is enabled to find completeness through its relations to the others, while fulfilling its own particular calling within its own cultural context. This does not mean, of course, that each church must accept every theological opinion, or follow every sacramental devotion or liturgical practice, characteristic of the other. Such a distinction, between essentials in which we agree and the non-essentials which do not inhibit communion, is a vital part of life within the Anglican Communion...”¹⁵

Such an articulation surely finds resonance in ecumenical agreements entered into by the Episcopal Church. In the second paragraph of *Called To Common Mission*, the document effecting full communion between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in American and the Episcopal Church, it is said that “We understand full communion to be a living relationship between distinct churches in which they recognize each other as catholic and

apostolic churches holding the essentials of the Christian faith, whereby the reconciliation, mutual availability, and interchangeability of ordained ministries is then full possible. Full communion is not the same as organic unity or merger. Rather, it is widely recognized as a significant expression of the full visible unity of all Christians, which we do not yet discern but for which we pray.”

“Within this full communion, we understand that the churches are fully interdependent while remaining responsible for their own decisions. Full communion includes a commitment to establish, locally and nationally, recognized organs of regular consultation and communication in order to express and strengthen the fellowship and enable common witness, life and service. Striving to end our divisions but to preserve our diversity, neither of our churches seeks to remake the other in its own image, and each seeks to be open to the gifts of the other as it seeks to be faithful to Christ and his mission. Each church shall be open to the encouragement and admonition of the other church for the sake of the gospel.”

And, *To Set Our Hope on Christ* finds this way to articulate that hope, “...the Gospel calls us into a great mystery, the reconciliation that Christ has won for us upon the Cross, and which can be wrought among us only by the grace of Christ. Learning to trust the faithfulness of those with whom we disagree can fuel the lifelong process of conversion for all. This mutual trust bears witness not only to the power of the bonds of unity, but also points quite beyond us to that mysterious power of divine grace at work in the Church’s unity...A unity-in-difference that reconciles divisions and holds out compassion to all can bear real witness to the power of Jesus’ prayer that ‘we all may be one,’ which John’s Gospel tells us was his fervent desire... We pray that the struggles of our Episcopal Church may always be used by the Lord to exhibit the power of God’s reconciling grace ‘so that the world may believe that’ God sent the world’s Redeemer.”¹⁶

That is certainly my prayer: that my own Communion will find ways to deal with these “Issues Facing Ecumenism.” If we can, perhaps we can be a model for how we might deal with them together in the Body of Christ in the search for unity. If we cannot, perhaps you can learn from our mistakes. So that – eventually – we all may be one!

- ¹ *The Windsor Report: 2004* (Published by The Anglican Communion Office, London, UK, 2004), page 39.
- ² *Windsor*, page 42.
- ³ *To Set Our Hope on Christ* (Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church Center, New York, NY, 2005), pages 19-20.
- ⁴ *Windsor*, page 43.
- ⁵ *Windsor*, page 46.
- ⁶ *Windsor*, page 45.
- ⁷ *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, page 17.
- ⁸ *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, page 31.
- ⁹ The American Heritage Dictionary; Third Edition, Dell Publishing, 1994
- ¹⁰ Norris, Richard. *Understanding the Faith of the Church* (Harper San Francisco, 1979), pages 4-5
- ¹¹ *Windsor*, page 45
- ¹² *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, page 19.
- ¹³ *The Book of Common Prayer*. (Oxford University Press, New York), pages 877-878.
- ¹⁴ *Windsor*, page 37.
- ¹⁵ *Windsor*, page 37.
- ¹⁶ *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, page 43.