

Analysis of the Windsor report

1. Introduction

The Windsor report, the work of the Lambeth Commission, was released on 18 October 2004.

The Commission was asked to reflect on the legal and theological implications for the Anglican Communion of the action taken in the USA in appointing an actively homosexual man as a Bishop and decisions in both the US and Canada approve of same-sex unions. It is clear that the Commission had put in a great deal of effort over a short space of time in order to produce the report.

2. Summary of the report

- 2.1 The Windsor report begins by seeking to justify the idea of theological development. It speaks of the primacy and authority of Scripture but in such a way as to legitimise theological development, even when such development appears to be in flat contradiction to what all previous generations of Christians understood to be the plain meaning of Scripture.
- 2.2 The report, therefore, defines the crisis faced by the Anglican Communion in terms of two provinces having taken action against the wishes of the remainder. It is open to the possibility, even seems to expect, that with time the majority may accept and agree with the development.
- 2.3 The report then seeks to define the Anglican Communion institutionally. Based on this, and the view of Scripture already set out, it therefore sees the present crisis in terms of actions that threaten the unity of the Communion.
- 2.4 When the report suggests action it calls merely for expressions of regret from those who have threatened the unity of the whole. Furthermore, all its other suggestions are primarily institutional.
- 2.5 This report is therefore typical of what we have come to expect in the western liberal churches. Whilst appearing to say useful things it is actually flawed in its underlying approach, in its analysis of the problems, and in the way in which it seeks to find solutions.
- 2.6 If the Anglican Communion is to survive the present crisis it will be necessary for the Primates to ignore the recommendations of the Windsor report and take decisive action.

3. Methodology

In the press conference Archbishop Gomez stated that the report represented the highest degree of agreement possible between the commission members. Put another way, the report represents the lowest common denominator theologically, the minimum that we can agree. Such an approach, often justified from the philosophy of G W F Hegel, undermines truth and results in ungodly compromise. It is an approach that is regularly followed in western churches, leading to weak statements that do not speak with conviction to the world around.

The Chairman of the Commission, Archbishop Robin Eames, has demonstrated in his own statements within the Church of Ireland that he has no underlying objection to the innovations that have taken place in ECUSA and Canada, merely that they have been taken against the wishes of the wider Communion. His failure to take any action against the Bishop of Limerick and Killaloe, who participated in the consecration in New Hampshire demonstrates this fact.

Given the terms of reference, chairmanship and composition of the Commission, no report that had the agreement of all was ever going to produce the decisive analysis and action now necessary.

4. Scripture and theological development

4.1 Can we ever make up our minds

The Lambeth Commission was not given freedom to address the issue underlying the present crisis in the Anglican Communion. The report therefore takes as given the theological position represented by Lambeth Resolution 1.10 but it does so in disturbing ways. In the press conference at the launch of the report Archbishop Eames described Lambeth 1.10 as representing the views of the Communion '*at this time*'. In saying this he laid great stress on the words '*at this time*'.

Such language is also to be found in the report. In paragraph 122 there is a call for a moratorium on action '*until some new consensus emerges in the Anglican Communion*'. Likewise in paragraph 145 the report refers to those provinces '*engaged in processes of discernment regarding the blessing of same sex unions*'.

Thus, the position of the Communion, stated in Lambeth 1.10, is presented as provisional and part of a process in which the Communion is gradually seeking to discern the truth. This approach gives validity and weight to those teaching error and means that the orthodox biblical teaching is provisional and open to question. It suggests that there can never be any definitive truth on any issue whatsoever. Whilst this is the prevailing view in western culture, it is not true Christianity. Because of the nature of God, Christians believe in objective truth and, specifically, that the Word of God stands forever.

4.2 A process of reception?

The report draws parallels to the Ordination of Women. Since Archbishop Eames also chaired the Commission on that issue this parallel was presumably in the minds of those who appointed him to chair the Lambeth Commission.

The report seems to suggest that the process of reception of the ordination of women is over. This is an absurd claim. As an example, many within the Church of England still refuse to accept women priests because it is contrary to scriptural teaching. Moreover, the Church has been declining twice as fast in the decade since the first ordination of women compared to the decade before, the number of men going into ministry has more than halved and the number of men and children in churches has fallen by twenty percent. These are not signs of a healthy church, rather they suggest that the development is wrong.

4.3. Is the Bible supreme?

The report affirms the supreme authority of Scripture but it then goes on to so qualify this that it becomes secondary to currently prevailing views of Church leaders or Bible scholars. This takes us back to the worst days of the medieval period when ordinary believers were thought to be incapable of understanding the Bible properly so that at times the Bible was actually banned. A fundamental principle of the Protestant Reformation was that the Bible can be understood by those who approach it in humility and in faith. This is not to decry scholarship or the need for accurate translation but anyone taking an honest look at the last two centuries can see that the western church has been crippled at times by various destructive ideas that have turned out to be short-term scholarly fashions.

The argument on Scripture culminates in paragraph 61 where the real intentions become plain. It is asserted those teachings of Scripture which previous generations have understood to be clear can now be reviewed and changed by the Church.

The supremacy of Scripture rests on the fact that it is the very Word of God. Mainstream Christianity has always held that the word of God, as originally given, is without error. The infallibility of Scripture is explicitly stated in the Elizabethan Homilies and it undergirds the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. By contrast it is explicitly stated in the Articles that the Church can err because some in it are 'not governed with the Spirit and Word of God'. Scripture, reason and tradition are never equal partners, Scripture is always over the Church.

4.4. The development of theology

In paragraph 32 the Commission speaks about theological development. 'Primary examples include the great fourth-century creeds, which go significantly beyond the actual words and concepts of scripture...' This is re-writing history and it is used to justify the idea that the Church may develop beyond what Scripture says. The classic formulations of Christian doctrine were intended by their originators to be faithful summaries of Scriptural truths. Their purpose in formulating them was not to go beyond Scripture but actually to safeguard the truth from error. When it was proposed to use phrases or words that go beyond Scripture this was only done with great reluctance and because the necessity of refuting error dictated it.

5. Failure to properly diagnose the problem

The report continually asserts that the present crisis has been caused because two provinces took action against the expressed wishes of the wider Communion. Such action is lamentable although in other circumstances it might not have been wrong. But the heart of the problem is that these provinces, and some in other provinces, are acting contrary to the will of God revealed in Scripture.

The report describes the problem in New Hampshire as "an openly acknowledged same gender union" (paragraph 129). This is not sufficient. There are Bishops, even Archbishops, who refuse to ask questions about the sexual conduct of clergy and justify this on the basis of not wanting to pry into other people's business. Immoral behaviour is wrong whether it is openly acknowledged or whether it is hidden.

But conduct is not the only problem. In the Epistle of James it states that those who teach will be judged all the more strictly (James 3.1) since the teacher can so easily lead others into error and sin. Immorality and false teaching usually go hand in hand but it is not sufficient to focus simply on behaviour.

Despite the analysis in the report, many in the western churches no longer accept that the Bible is itself the very Word of God (God-breathed). As a consequence they do not accept that it has the authority of God but prefer to see it as reflecting how early believers understood the authority of God. Therefore they feel at liberty to draw conclusions, apparently based on principles they derive from Scripture, which are at odds with the conclusions reached by early Christians and, indeed, every generation of Christians since.

6. The unity of the Anglican Communion

6.1. Divided we stand, united we fall

The report gives the impression, which was even more apparent at the press conference, that what matters most is unity. This raises the obvious question as to whether there is any issue at all on which division might be necessary? It is apparent that historically the Church has seen that there are issues, and many of them, on which it is more important to uphold the truth against unity. There have no doubt been instances when division has not helped the cause of the gospel. Nevertheless, in contrast to the compromised, weak and declining churches of Europe and North America today, the divisions of the early church, prompted by the desire to safeguard truth, were accompanied by extraordinary growth.

6.2. What holds us together.

Various things can be said to have provided the glue that joins together the Anglican Communion. Today the focus tends to be upon the 'instruments of unity' and this is the approach taken in Section C of the report. This leads to an institutional understanding of Communion and, inevitably, institutional solutions to the present problems.

The churches of the Anglican Communion have a shared history, but they also have a shared doctrinal basis and historically a shared worship. With the passage of time some of the churches have grown away from the common doctrine and from the principles of that common worship. The Communion still has a shared history together with many dynamic links between churches and individuals. However, a focus on institutions, the 'instruments of unity', has gradually supplanted shared beliefs as the basis of unity.

6.3. We are not a papal Church

One way to hold the Communion together is to focus on and strengthen the institutions as the basis of our unity, whether that be the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Primates, the ACC or whatever. The Windsor report leads gently in this direction. However, there is great danger in this approach since it will lead us step by step into being a papal Church. Article 27 of the proposed Covenant in the report moves conclusively when it states that the Archbishop of Canterbury shall have the final say in interpretation of the Covenant. In English Anglicanism there have always been strong checks and balances against the abuse of clerical power. In particular, the Bishops have never been given free reign over doctrine. Rather the laity, historically through their representatives in parliament, have safeguarded doctrine against abuse. This is supposed to be part of the dynamic of synodical government in the church today.

6.4 Communion requires common beliefs.

What has been eroded in our Communion is the presence of common beliefs. As some provinces have drifted further and further from historic Christianity and Scriptural teaching, even though they believed they were right in their own eyes, they have broken the Communion.

If the Communion is to hold together it must not make institutions the basis of its unity. Instead it will need to commit itself afresh to the common doctrinal standards that gave it birth. The Lambeth Quadrilateral is not sufficient for this task. The historic expressions of our common beliefs are the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion and the Book of Common Prayer. These must be part of our continuing doctrinal identity.

7. Offering remedies for the wrong diseases

7.1 What was wrong?

In section 134 of the report various calls are made for regret to be expressed. But what is it that they are to regret? It is 'that the proper constraints of the bonds of communion were breached'. The Commission could not bring itself to say that the developments in ECUSA and Canada are in themselves wrong. Rather the mistake was to go ahead without the consent of others and, thereby, threaten unity. It must be made clear that the error is in promoting practices that God in His Word condemns.

7.2. The scandal of equivalence

Because it sees the error in terms of the threat to unity the report lumps together those who have institutionalised immorality in the United States and Canada with those who have offered help and oversight to individuals and churches being persecuted because of their opposition to such immorality. This is a scandal and the authors of the report should be asked to state publicly that they reject any idea that these are equivalent.

7.3 Regret or repentance?

If the only problem was that some in the Communion had been upset then expressing regret might be the right course of action. However, because the error is rebellion against God, the only proper response is repentance. This always includes the desire and determination to change and to undo, where possible, the harm done. It is good that many Anglican leaders around the world have spoken in these terms. It is a disgrace that the Commission has refused to speak in terms of repentance.

7.4 What happened to discipline?

It is apparent from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, the charges to clergy at ordination and in the very existence of Canon Law that discipline and good order are part of the fabric of authentic Anglicanism. Indeed in one of the Elizabethan Homilies (for Whitsunday) it explicitly states that discipline is a mark of the true Church. Regrettably in the western churches discipline is little practiced. The present problems in the US, Canada and elsewhere are the result of several generations of Anglicans refusing to uphold the doctrinal standards of the Church. It is regrettable, though hardly surprising, that the Windsor report avoids the very idea of discipline.

The purpose of discipline is threefold. First, to uphold the honour of God's name, second to protect the flock from error and third to seek to bring the erring to their senses. Discipline is an act of love and the failure to discipline is both unloving and uncaring.

The difficult question, but one which the Commission ought to have addressed, is how the Communion can exercise effective discipline today. The report does make various proposals regarding the instruments of the Communion and a possible Covenant. Whilst these may have some value it is far more important to get the principles of discipline right, which the report fails to do.

Discipline was clearly practiced within the New Testament churches and is spoken about many times in the epistles. The primary means of discipline is exclusion from fellowship or the refusal to have fellowship together in some way. This in itself is highly significant because it is intended to show to those under discipline, and therefore to others both within and outside church, that they are in a broken relationship with God.

Some Provinces, to their credit, have already declared themselves out of Communion or in impaired Communion with ECUSA and Diocese of New Westminster. This needs to be followed through by the Communion as a whole. There is no point in getting hung up on the meaning of terms like 'impaired communion' or 'out of communion'; actions will speak for themselves.

8. What action must be taken now?

- 8.1 The Communion needs a much clearer and more definite statement of its common beliefs. The starting point for this are the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.
- 8.2 The Communion must break free from the mindset that says every truth is up for grabs. It will need to take as given those truths which are given to us in Scripture, and which have found expression in the historic creeds and in the formularies of the Anglican churches. There may be instances when by common consent some issue should be revisited, but these will be rare.
- 8.3 There clearly need to be some central bodies to serve and give expression to the Communion as a whole. However, any attempt to give more authority to these bodies must be undertaken very warily.
- 8.4 The central bodies will need to make decisions at times to determine when members of the Communion have acted in ways that are incompatible with the teaching of Scripture.
- 8.5 The primary means of discipline should be the breaking of fellowship. This will be expressed in different ways as circumstances dictate, it could include:
 - refusing to participate in fellowship together;
 - refusing to have fellowship through giving and receiving;
 - exclusion from representation in some or all of the central bodies; and,
 - refusing to recognise the validity of orders.
- 8.6 In the particular instance facing the Communion at this time, the most obvious response would be for the Primates of the Communion to resolve and declare, with the consent of the Archbishop of Canterbury, that the Episcopal Church of the United States and the Anglican Church of Canada are no longer part of the Anglican Communion. They should, therefore, be excluded straight away from the meetings of Primates and Bishops and from the representative bodies, such as the ACC.
- 8.7 The aim is not to punish but to bring about repentance, to safeguard the faithful, and to uphold the honour of God's name. Such action would need to include spelling out of the terms under which these churches would be readmitted to communion. This must include:
 - clear statements that their actions have been wrong;
 - the undoing and rescinding of certain resolutions;
 - the passing of resolutions explicitly upholding Biblical morality and rejecting the innovations they have introduced; and,
 - the introduction of discipline within their own life to give expression to these statements and resolutions.
- 8.8 If the fellowships concerned make it plain that they cannot and will not go back then they must be allowed to go their way. They have ceased to be part of historic Anglicanism and should no longer be part of the Communion. If the Lord is in what they have done they will prosper, if not they will continue to decline.
- 8.9 Until such time as these provinces repent provision must be made to offer genuine support and fellowship to those within the provinces who uphold Biblical standards. This must eventually include representation in the central bodies of the Communion and the recognition of their orders.
- 8.10 Since ECUSA and the Anglican Church of Canada are now outside the Anglican Communion Diocesan and Provincial Boundaries will no longer be a barrier to providing adequate pastoral care or to evangelism and church planting.

There is nothing to be gained by the sort of compromise represented in the Windsor report. Instead, now is the time for honesty. The Anglican Communion will be best served by gracious yet decisive action. In the grace of God it is possible that such action will serve to bring back the western churches from the very brink of destruction.

*Church Society, Dean Wace House, 16 Rosslyn Road, Watford. WD18 0NY United Kingdom
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