

The Windsor Report ON HOLY SCRIPTURE

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I have been asked to share some of my thoughts about the Windsor Report's discussion of Holy Scripture. As will be evident, I don't think much of this treatment, not because what it says is wrong, but because it is so brief and unclear.

The discussion of Scripture in the Report amounts to just three pages of its 71 pages of text (pages 27-30), and is found principally in Section B paragraphs 53-62. That it is so short is both surprising and unfortunate, given the extent to which the Communion's current disputes are rooted in different interpretations of particular biblical texts. Now the Report, of course, is not really about same-sex relationships – it's about church discipline. But, despite this, its rather brief discussion of the Bible is not adequate, given that many of our problems are rooted in disagreements over how to read Scripture.

In my brief comments, I want to identify some of my concerns about this treatment of Scripture, and leave you with a few questions to consider.

What does the Windsor Report seek to affirm about Scripture?

Paragraph 53 begins with the following statement: „Within Anglicanism, scripture has always been recognized as the Church's supreme authority“ (p.27).

This is a very odd statement. It doesn't really express the view of Thomas Cranmer, nor Richard Hooker, and it might even make the great Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin cringe. They would suggest to us that the „supreme authority“ of the Church is Christ. Interesting enough, this is what paragraph 54 later admits, when it acknowledges that Scripture regularly speaks of God as the supreme authority. Well, if this is the case, perhaps the Report should have stated this outright, for it makes considerable difference where we place our emphasis.

A more helpful emphasis on the place of Scripture in the Church might suggest something like the following. The Church exists in the space which is made by the Word (capital W not little w). „Scripture is not the word of the Church. The Church is the Church of the Word.“¹ But, the text itself – that strange and ancient collection of exciting, puzzling, hopeful, and sometimes annoying writings – is not itself the fullness of God's Word – the Word made

¹ See John Webster's book, *Holy Scripture: A dogmatic sketch*. (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

flesh. To suggest that the text itself is God's Word is, as John Webster would suggest to us, tantamount to treating the text like transubstantiation treats the bread and wine of the Eucharist. It switches theology's proper focus from the action of God, to some creaturely material object. Holy Scripture is the servant of God's Word, not the other way around.

This is why, as Paul Gibson has pointed out, it is so significant that we Anglicans follow our reading of Scripture in the liturgy with the statement „The Word of the Lord.“ We don't say the words of the Lord.² This is a very important distinction. What we seek in our reading of Scripture is the Word of God – that which all the words point towards. The Windsor Report lacks such a clear statement when it begins by problematically calling Scripture a „supreme authority.“ I would suggest that this lack of clarity might be quite misleading for some readers.

Now, of course, we know Christ principally through the Scriptures. But in the Anglican Tradition, it is suggested that our knowledge of Christ is not exclusively through the Bible. Anglicanism also suggests to us that we can know Christ through the sacraments, through the teachings of the Church, and through the work of the Holy Spirit. And so, I would ask you to consider this question as you reflect on this Report:

Ø Does this short section really articulate very well how our Church understands the ways in which it listens for God's Word?

Although these opening paragraphs of the Windsor Report are not very carefully developed perhaps the authors of the Report simply intend to suggest to us that too often we casually marginalize Scripture by employing facile references to the three (or four) legged stool idea.

This view of authority in the Anglican Church argues that there are three „legs“ to our understanding of authority: Scripture, Tradition, and Reason (some people want add „Experience“ to this list, as they suggest that it is something completely different than our reasoning capacity). Although I agree that there are three „legs“ to our way of doing theology, I think it is quite problematic to suggest that all three are completely equal. And so, if this is what the Report intends to warn us about, I would consider this to be helpful. Unfortunately, the discussion does little to advance much further than this. I agree that Scripture is our principal and primary authority under Christ. But, as the Report admits, we need help to understand its words, and so we are assisted by the traditions of the Church, and by our human reasoning, and, particularly, through dialogue with our fellow Christians.

The section does attempt to present a few helpful points for us:

The Windsor Report's discussion of the Bible does make some important points that I think are important to notice:

a) the Bible can't serve as a rigid rule book, or a list of proof-texts.

² See Paul Gibson's discussion of this point in chapter four of his book *Discerning the Word*. (Anglican Book Centre, 2000).

After paragraph 54 affirms that the authority of the triune God is „exercised through scripture,“ it immediately admits that exactly how God does this is difficult to determine. The Report is quite clear on the fact that the Bible is read by interpreting it, and that the act of interpretation is sometimes a complicated and difficult task. Although Scripture promises answers to the questioning reader, it does not often offer easy answers.

b) the Report encourages a balanced approach to the Bible

In paragraph 60, the Windsor Report criticises dismissing the Bible as old-fashioned, out of date, or being an archaic collection of old myths. At the same time, it argues against approaching Scripture with a „pre-critical“ perspective. And so, simply pointing to a part of the Bible and assuming that we know exactly what it means is not a faithful way to read Scripture.

I appreciate both of these warnings, and affirm with the Report that the Church finds its identity through wrestling together with Scripture, seeking God’s Word for our community and for our individual lives. I also appreciate how paragraphs 57-62 are very clear to admit that the work of interpreting Scripture is no easy thing, and often leads to disagreement.

But, although it makes these very basic points, the Windsor Report offers very little assistance on discerning how we are to do this, or how our Church might nurture such a treatment of the text. In fact, what it does say about such matters is sometimes rather contradictory.

Why do I say this?

Two examples of tension and contradiction in the Windsor Report

i) Community Reading and Episcopal Authority

Paragraph 57 states the following: „it is vital that [Scripture] be read at the heart of worship;“ as the Church lives out its responsibility to „engage with the Bible together.“

I appreciate this emphasis on a communal reading of Scripture, rooted in worship. Isn’t it true that one of the characteristics of Anglican liturgy, and its Prayer Books, is the amount of Scripture read during a service? Many of our ecumenical partners from other Christian denominations note that this is one thing they appreciate about our tradition. Anglicans gather together to listen to the reading of Scripture, and they wrestle together as a community to discern what these words might mean in our present situation.

But after making this point, paragraph 58 then starts to outline a very different emphasis. It describes bishops as being „teachers of Scripture.“ I’m not exactly sure what the Report means by this. It is not at all clear how they understand bishops functioning in this way.

I would suggest that this is not principally how bishops are usually described in the Anglican tradition. Bishops are our chief pastors, symbols of unity, and our link to the communion of saints who have gone before us. Bishops certainly serve to help Anglicans be attentive to the larger view of the Church and its calling. But I'm not sure that it is accurate to describe them as our chief „teachers of Scripture.“

My point here is that there appears to be a shift from an emphasis on reading Scripture together as a community, to the very different view that privileges specific readers – Bishops. Such a position was not a major point among the early Anglican theologians, nor among the leaders of the Reformation. I am concerned that this description of bishops reveals one of the more general biases of the Windsor Report's agenda, which is to re-emphasise episcopal authority in the Anglican Communion – and a certain kind of episcopal authority. The Report is not all that concerned about local diocesan episcopal authority, but about the authority of the Communion leadership (the Archbishop of Canterbury; the Communion Office; and the Primates).

Because of these concerns that I have, I would suggest that Anglicans consider the following question in their ongoing reflection on the Windsor Report:

Ø Is there tension between the emphases made in paragraphs #57 and #58? If so, what are we to make of this contradiction?

I would add a related question to this concern. In our discussions of the Report and the sources of authority in the Anglican tradition, perhaps some of you have noted that the Lambeth Quadrilateral is mentioned a number of times. This statement affirms what the Anglican Communion considers to be faithful signs of the Church: Scripture, the Creeds, the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, and the Episcopacy. Given that the Anglican Communion still affirms this, I am led to ask the following:

Ø Why do only Bishops serve as guides to reading Scripture in the Windsor Report, but not also the other elements of the Lambeth Quadrilateral: the Creeds and Sacraments?

ii) The Report's quotation of Scripture

One statement in the section on Holy Scripture from the Windsor Report struck me in particular. Paragraph 61 states the following:

„We can no longer be content to drop random texts into arguments, imagining the point is thereby proved, or indeed sweep away sections of the New Testament as irrelevant to today's world, imagining that problems are thereby solved.“

I agree fully with this statement. If this is what some of us are doing in our reading of the Bible, then we need to hear this. But, after appreciating this helpful comment, it strikes me that the Report itself does not really live up to this principal.

For example, in Section A: (pg 11), the Report discusses what it calls the „biblical foundations“ for communion and unity. In paragraph #2, it employs brief quotations from the Letter to the Ephesians. My question is this: why is Ephesians the best place to look in the Bible for help on this question? Perhaps it is, but the authors of the Report don't tell us why they refer to Ephesians and offer us only very short quotations from it. It seems to me that this practice isn't really in keeping with the Report's statement that we refrain from dropping „random texts into arguments, imagining the point is thereby proved.“

Similarly, in paragraph #4, we are directed to 1st Corinthians, and are told that Paul „does not hold back from administering severe discipline in the case of scandalous behaviour.“ Given the difficult context that this Report was written in, I find this brief sentence rather scandalous. It is a loaded phrase, and its biblical roots are not very clear. In this paragraph, Scripture is being referred to briefly, but not in a clear and careful way. The Report is using Scripture in a way that it tells us not to.

I want to be clear on this point. I'm not suggesting that it is inappropriate to turn to Ephesians and 1st Corinthians – it may be very appropriate. All I'm pointing out is that the authors don't make it clear why these books in particular are appropriate, as opposed to, say, the Book of Acts, or the Gospels. And the rather off-hand use of proof-texting here seems to me to be exactly what paragraph 61 says we shouldn't do.

We might want to ask the authors a bit more about this use of these particular biblical texts. For example: In what sort of situation does Paul write these things? Why? What does he mean by „scandalous behaviour“? In what ways might these texts be applicable to us today?

In the context that this Windsor Report is written in, such brief biblical references only repeat the problem that the Report itself criticizes. On this and many other of its points, the document's statements are unclear and not very helpful for dealing with the Church's current situation.

Finally...

To my mind, the discussion of the authority of Scripture ends on a very strange note. Paragraph #62 concludes with a rather sentimental statement, in that, „we should expect that the Bible would be a means of unity, not division.“

This is a rather naive statement, given the context of the Report, is it not? And is it not strange to say this, after all that has been said about the difficulty of interpretation.

Furthermore, does not the reading of Scripture often result in unity? It leads Christians to commit themselves to Christ. It is a central part of our experience of Church and why we continue to find a home in the Anglican tradition. We agree that it calls us to follow Christ

by seeking to love our neighbours, to have no other gods but the one witnessed to by the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Often, the Bible is a source of unity.

But what is also obvious is that, when different people, in different times and contexts, and from different cultures, read the text, sometimes there are issues that they disagree on. Why this would be of surprise to anyone puzzles me, and I think the authors of this section of the Report are unhelpful, and almost irresponsible, when they continue to offer us such Sunday-School sentimentality at the end of such an important Report.

By way of conclusion: an image taken from B.F. Westcott

I would like to leave you with a very different description of the place of Scripture in the Anglican tradition. It is taken from the writing of Bishop Brooke Foss Westcott (1825-1910), who held the Regius Chair at the University of Cambridge, and was a biblical scholar of international reputation. He was a teacher of the historical criticism of the Bible, a person of committed faith, and passionate leader in the Church.

Westcott sometimes described his relationship to the authority of Scripture by comparing it to the image of marriage.³ Although he affirmed that the Bible was a gift from God, he acknowledged that our reading of it is always partial and provisional. And so he described the certainty that we have in committing ourselves to Scripture – despite not in being in possession of clear solutions and absolute clarity about its meaning - as being like a marital promise. Our relationship to Scripture is like that made through a marriage vow. There is uncertainty about what comes after marriage. Where the relationship will take us is never entirely clear. We are sometimes called to account by our partner; sometimes embraced; sometimes disappointed. And so the Christian's commitment to Scripture is a promise to abide with this language and framework for our growing and the goodness of our ongoing salvation..

I would suggest that what our Communion needs now is not the renegotiating of episcopal boundaries and structures, but a return to tilling the soil of Scripture. We need leaders who will model to us how this is done – in and through the turmoil of heated, passionate, but also committed disagreement.

The Windsor Report does not really point the way towards this. It is not so much a theology of Holy Scripture, but rather a defence of a new form of episcopal authority. If its intention is to call us all to once again submit ourselves to the in-breaking of God's Word, through the reading and interpreting together of Holy Scripture, so that the Church can be interrupted, broken, and renewed – then I am in favour of its hope. But I don't believe that its recommended procedures go very far toward suggesting to us a way forward that will allow this to occur.

³ See Rowan Williams' description of Westcott in chapter eight of his book *Anglican Identities* (Cowley Publications, 2003).

