

A Response to the Windsor Report

There is so much at fault in the Windsor Report that it is difficult to know where to begin. For instance, discussion of the so-called ‘Instruments of Unity’ neglects to mention the fact that lay people are represented in only one of them, namely, the Anglican Consultative Council. Otherwise, the instruments consist in the Archbishop of Canterbury, or in gatherings of bishops, which suggests a bias against democratic means of governance. Besides, there are serious questions about the appropriateness of construing any of the instruments as exercising binding authority over democratically governed member churches. The group of primates meeting together, though called an instrument of unity, is of very recent provenance, and cannot be said to have any clear authority within the Communion. The Lambeth Conference, though it may have much moral authority (see ¶102, and below), has no legislative authority. And the ACC, as its name implies, is consultative, not legislative. Finally, the Archbishop of Canterbury is a *primus inter pares*, not a pope or supreme bishop with real ordinary authority throughout the Communion. The suggestion that these bodies, or a combination of them, should be able to exercise legislative and disciplinary power throughout the Communion would change the character of Anglicanism in such a way as to raise the question whether this is what most Anglicans have believed about their church.

Another question of considerable importance is raised by the expression ‘the teaching of the Anglican Communion as a whole.’ This is repeated several times, as though it has some clear reference. In ¶69 it seems clearly to be used in relation to decisions of Lambeth Councils, and yet it is quite clear that Lambeth, whatever its moral authority,¹ has never been given legislative power that is binding on member churches. Indeed, the moral authority of Lambeth has been explicitly questioned by a number of writers in connexion with the decision of Lambeth 1998 regarding (homo)sexuality (Resolution 1.10, Appendix 3.6) The Windsor Report itself notes that “there has been some controversy about the way in which this resolution was arrived at and voted upon.” (¶25) In this case they use the expedient of referring to the primates’ 16 October 2003 statement reaffirming this resolution (among others). This does not, however, deal with the question of its moral authority, since it is precisely its moral authority that has been questioned. Its reaffirmation by the primates in a highly fractious situation within the Communion does nothing to answer questions about that authority.

The most serious questions, however, are in my view raised in Section B: Fundamental Principles. To start with the first paragraph of this section, it is disturbing to note that theological and moral questions regarding gay and lesbian relationship have been reduced to theological and ethical concern for “*the practice of same sex relations and the blessing or ordination or consecration of those who engage in them.*” (¶43, italics in the original, emphasis added) It is important to note, I think, that the motion of General Synod 2004 (Anglican Church of Canada General Synod 2004 A134 [Appendix 3.12]) referred to the “integrity and sanctity of committed adult same-sex *relationships*.” (my italics) It is incorrect, and misleading, for the Windsor Report to reduce concern about same-sex *relationships* to *sex acts, simpliciter*.

However, to the fundamental principles themselves. Communion, says the report, “subsists in visible unity, common confession of the apostolic faith, common belief in scripture and the creeds, common baptism and shared eucharist, and a mutually recognised common ministry.” (¶49) One thing that had to be cleared up right away, of course, is the fact that there is not in fact a universal recognition of a common ministry amongst member provinces of the Anglican Communion. This the Report does not effectively explain. Nor does it explain why differences of opinion on a matter so fundamental is not a church dividing issue. It does speak about “the normally imprecise language of ‘impaired’, ‘fractured’, or ‘restricted’ communion,” (¶50) but not about the ecclesiological implications of that use.

In my view the heart of the report lies in ¶¶53-62 and ¶¶87-96. The issues involved in the present disagreements within the Communion centre upon questions of scriptural and doctrinal authority, and upon the way in which distinctions between essential and inessential (adiaphora) aspects of the faith are made.

The Report is extremely weak on the Bible. While holding that scripture has always been considered of supreme authority within Anglicanism (¶53), the way that scripture is qualified by tradition and interpretation is not explored.

¹See ¶102. The reference to Owen Chadwick is extremely tendentious in light of the fact that there are serious moral questions about the way in which Resolution 1.10 was arrived at and voted upon.

Indeed, the Report expresses surprise that instead of being a force for unity, scripture often underlies our divisions. (e.g., ¶53 and ¶62) But why should we suppose in the first place that anything subject, as the Bible must be, to interpretation, and often widely differing interpretations, should provide a foundation for unity? There are clearly some unspoken assumptions being made here. Perhaps the writers of the Report believe that scripture is pellucidly clear, but if they do, it is difficult not to conclude that the Report was written in deliberate ignorance of contemporary biblical scholarship and hermeneutics.

Perhaps the most disturbing claim of the report comes in ¶93. The question concerns action in relation to a matter that is otherwise adiaphora. If there are a sufficient number of Christians² who find action in accordance with this matter (by others) “scandalous and offensive, either in the sense that they will be led into acting against their own consciences or that they will be forced, for conscience’s sake, to break fellowship with those who go ahead,” then, the report states, “the biblical guidelines insist that those who have no scruples about the proposed action should nevertheless refrain from going ahead.” The biblical guideline in question is undoubtedly Paul’s argument regarding meat offered to idols (1 Cor 8.9-13). The issue involved in our present divisions, however, does not concern a matter so indifferent as this³. It concerns actions considered by one side in this dispute to be in accord with the principles of natural justice. What this paragraph is saying is that, if one’s action in accord with one’s conscience concerning a matter which, on this view, is in accord with the principles of natural justice, will be scandalous and offensive to a sufficient number of other Christians, then one should refrain from so acting (in accord with the principles of natural justice). I do not think that this is what Paul had in mind, and it seems to me to be the most offensive statement in the whole of the Windsor Report. It cannot be allowed to stand as a principle of Christian action.

The truth is that scripture is not the kind of authority that the Report takes it to be. There is no agreed interpretation of scripture such that it can provide a basis for unity in the Communion, and we should be under no such illusions. Nor should it be used as an imposed authority (by means of the Instruments of Unity) in order to achieve this end. Indeed, if the principle of action discussed in ¶93 is taken as foundational for decisions made by member provinces of the Communion, then we are in serious conflict with Christian (or, for that matter, any other) morality. For surely the Lambeth Commission is not arguing that people should refrain from doing justice just because others will be scandalised if they do so! Nor could Paul possibly be taken to be claiming any such thing. The supposed biblical guideline in this matter is therefore not biblical at all. The Commission cannot be arguing that the Bible, interpreted correctly, delivers immoral consequences, can it? This outcome shows the difficulty of prescribing what will and what will not be acceptable as biblical interpretation.

Our present divisions concern differences of opinion regarding what can and what cannot be allowed to constitute the truth about our understanding of the Bible. Lambeth 1998 attempted to close this gap by prohibiting some interpretations of scripture as incompatible with it. This *coup de main* was not successful. The North American Church continued to uphold interpretations that were dismissed by the Anglican bishops assembled in council at Canterbury in 1998, and it was right to do so. It is not likely that this type of thought control will be successful in the future. Even the attempt of the African bishops to control the thinking of their clergy in training will not be successful. Nor should it be. One of the principles noticeable by its absence in the Windsor Report is the freedom of Anglicans to think for themselves (a freedom which has resulted in a rich diversity of views within Anglican Christianity). Should the Communion be successful in subverting this principle, the Anglican Communion will be a mere shadow of itself and not worthy the allegiance of Christians who value the dignity of the human person created in the image of God.

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²Does the report mean Christians in general or just Anglican Christians?

³In fact, thinking it indifferent is to miss the point entirely, and raises questions as to who, precisely, authored the report.