

Report of a
Meeting
between representatives of
Church Society
and
Dr Rowan Williams
(Archbishop of Canterbury Designate)

'Guard what was committed to your trust...' 1 Tim 6.20

A REPORT ON THE MEETING WITH DR ROWAN WILLIAMS

The announcement of the appointment of Dr Rowan Williams as the next Archbishop of Canterbury was met with dismay by the Council of Church Society. We considered the biblical injunctions on how to deal with false teaching within the Christian fellowship and decided that whilst this may not be directly applicable to this case it was wise to follow the pattern and therefore requested a meeting with Dr Williams.

We regret that some of the details of the meeting were reported in the national press before the event. This did not help us in the meeting. We were received graciously by Dr Williams, who had every reason to be annoyed with us and with others. We were also very grateful that Dr Williams did not try to disguise his views, he was prepared to say what he believed even though he knew that it would cause division between us.

The three of us who met Dr Williams were asked by the Council to talk with him about the issues of the authority of scripture, the way of salvation and sexual conduct outside of heterosexual marriage. Inevitably the discussion kept returning to the last issue and we did not spend as much time as we would have wanted on the matter of salvation.

Having spoken to Dr Williams in private we believed it right before God to bring the matter into the open. Whilst this may seem like the Church washing its dirty linen in public we are very conscious that when someone teaches error in public it is not enough to rebuke them in private. It is incumbent on Christian leaders to refute publicly pronounced error in the public domain.

Salvation

Our discussion with Dr Williams regarding the doctrine of Salvation was brief and unsatisfactory. He claimed to uphold what the 39 Articles teach and to believe that a person can only be saved through Christ. However, as far as he is concerned this does mean that a person of

another religion can be saved even though they do not personally know Christ. Such a view is normally characterised as the 'anonymous Christian' view. It seems impossible to reconcile with Jesus teaching that whoever 'believes in Him, is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.' (Jn 3.18).

Dr Williams was unwilling to own the language of substitutionary atonement but was prepared to say that 'Jesus died for my sin'. We consider this to be a vitally important issue but it was not one we were able to pursue in the time available.

Sexual practice

What makes this appointment so different from any others is that Dr Williams will be the first Archbishop of Canterbury who is prepared to condone sexual immorality. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians chapter 6 verses 9 to 10 it says clearly that those who practice immorality, including homosexual practice, will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. In contrast Dr Williams believes that there may be circumstances in which homosexual practice is acceptable. In our discussions he explained that where someone has heterosexual desires he believed that the biblical commands for fidelity applied and therefore stated that he did not think sexual intercourse outside marriage was acceptable. However, he believes that if someone has purely homosexual desires then he does not think the biblical commands necessarily apply. Within a committed 'covenantal' relationship it may be permissible for homosexual practice to take place.

It is clear to us that such an argument is wrong. It makes a nonsense of biblical teaching and is fraught with problems regarding what constitutes purely homosexual desires and whether such desires may change with time. It also raises questions about the nature of the fall and particularly what one makes of someone who, for example, has a deep seated desire to hurt, steal or kill (which certainly exists in some people). When pressed Dr Williams tried to defend his view by reference to Romans chapter 1 which, he said, spoke of people abandoning their natural desires for unnatural. Therefore, if the natural desires of a person are wholly homosexual, they do not fall foul of what is spoken of.

However, it was pointed out to him that the Greek of Romans 1.27 simply does not allow such an interpretation. The Greek speaks of the 'unnatural use' not the unnatural desire.

We do not consider this to be a minor or secondary issue. It is clear that this is a consistent position which Dr Williams holds and that it manifests itself in various ways.

In 1989 Dr Williams spoke to the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement in an address entitled 'The Body's Grace'. This has been recently republished, presumably with Dr Williams' approval. There is much that could and has been written about this talk. It seems to us and to others that there is ample within it to justify the claim that Dr Williams is prepared to see sex outside marriage as acceptable. However, it is particularly what he says and does not say about homosexual practice that makes it plain that this is an important issue. He also dismisses those who return to the biblical commands as the basis of learning God's will for his people, indeed he calls us 'fundamentalists'.

The practical outworking of such views is also evident in the fact that he has acknowledged that he has ordained someone who he had good reason to believe was in a homosexual relationship but chose not to ask questions about their moral conduct. Furthermore, he has for some time been on the editorial board of the Journal of Theology and Sexuality. In a recent edition this journal had articles which affirm the value of pornography and homosexual practice.

We consider that his teaching is incompatible with the 1987 resolution of the General Synod, with the Kuala Lumpur Statement and with resolution 1.10 of the Lambeth Conference 1998. It is known that Dr Williams abstained in the vote on Lambeth 1.10. In a letter to the Primates Dr Williams does not affirm Lambeth 1.10 as he is reported as doing. He does appear to say that a province of the communion should not take action that would cause further division. But primarily he interprets Lambeth 1.10 as commending 'continuing reflection on this issue'. This is typical of the language used by those who wish to overturn a decision. In fact the resolution gives a commitment to monitoring work done and listening to the experience of homosexuals. There is no hint that the decisions made are provisional.

It must therefore be recognised that on the one hand we have scripture teaching that those who practice immorality will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven and on the other hand Dr Williams saying that in certain, albeit limited, circumstances, homosexual practice may be acceptable. Which is right? If the scripture is right Dr Williams is leading people to sin and destruction.

God's Word written?

Underlying the matter of homosexual practice is, as always, the authority of scripture. In our discussion with Dr Williams we quoted to Dr Williams Article 20 which describes the Bible as God's Word written. Of course, this represents the standard Christian view through the ages that the Bible is God's revelation, indeed, as Paul describes the Old Testament, it is God-breathed. Dr Williams ducked the issue of whether or not he accepted this. When we pressed him he states his understanding that 'scripture exposes us to the authority of those through whom God's revelation comes'. This view separates the revelation of God from the scriptures and we believe it to be entirely incompatible with Anglican doctrine. When the matter is teased out it means that in the Bible we do encounter the experience which other people have had of God and we can therefore learn from their example. There may even be a desire to ensure that our understanding fits in with the general stream of understanding of Christians through the ages. However, it is not a view which affirms that scripture is itself God's Word written.

In Dr Williams' book 'Open to Judgement' it is possible to see what this means in practice. In commenting on the book of Revelation he draws the distinction between two strands, one of which he presents as majestic insights. However, he also describes parts of the book of Revelation as 'page after page of paranoid fantasy' and speaks of the 'rantings of John the Divine about his theological rivals'. He does believe that there is something to be gained from seeing the tension between these two strands, however, it is all too apparent that some of scripture is not divine revelation but rather simply human speculation, even the product of a diseased mind. It ought to be readily apparent that this is an entirely arbitrary distinction. As always in such critical views of the Bible what it boils down to is that someone finds certain

parts of the scriptures enlightening and other parts distasteful. Man (or woman) becomes the measure of God's Word and therefore scripture is subjected to our reason and human whims.

The Anglican Church can have nothing to do with such an approach. The Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888 gives the primary essential for the reuniting of the Christian Church as: '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.'

Where the tradition of the Church or the reason of Church leaders is put above the authority of scripture then there can be no unity. Indeed, those who deviate from this truth and who hold that the Bible is something other than God's Word written are guilty of dividing the Christian Church, not least the Church of England.

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Church Society exists to promote a biblical faith which shapes both the Church of England and the society in which we live for the sake of Christ. Such a faith is carefully expressed in the 39 Articles of Religion and in the Protestant liturgy entrusted to us after the reformation.

Church Society works through publishing, supporting churches, campaigning and the administration of charitable trusts and properties.

If you long to see the Church of England upholding a clear biblical faith and being a faithful witness in the nation then we invite you to join us. Please contact:

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