

Jesmond Parish Church
COLOURED SUPPLEMENT (October 2002)

“A LINE IN THE SAND”, REFORM and ROWAN WILLIAMS

by

David Holloway

*In the middle of August I was asked to write a piece for the monthly Christian newspaper Evangelicals Now. I had no particular desire to write. I was persuaded, however, by the editor because of the deepening concern about the blanket welcome being given to Rowan Williams as the next Archbishop of Canterbury in spite of his heterodox views, especially in the area of sexual morality. As I shared this concern, I wrote the following which appeared in the September edition of the paper. It was headed: **A LINE IN THE SAND***

Calvin warned Christians when faced with “open enemies of the truth” they must be careful of “the heat of contention”. But they must not “appear to flatter by keeping silence.” Many Evangelicals have been silent following the announcement that Rowan Williams is to be the next Archbishop of Canterbury, a man known for his heterodox teachings with regard to basic Christian sex ethics. Others have made muted or ambiguous statements that *de facto* concede the principle – namely that encouraging sexual immorality is a secondary issue over which Christians are at liberty to disagree. Others have given a positive welcome.

Mark Ashton, Richard Bewes, Jonathan Fletcher, Angus Macleay, Hugh Palmer, Vaughan Roberts, William Taylor and myself (all incumbents of larger churches) sent an *Open Letter* to the Prime Minister that publicly opposed the appointment. This was on the grounds that regarding homosexual behaviour Rowan Williams was flying “in the face of the clear teaching of the Holy Scriptures and the resolutions of the Lambeth Conference 1998.” Tony Blair courteously replied, particularly remarking that “his appointment has been warmly welcomed by many leading Evangelicals in the Church”.

Out of proportion?

Perhaps someone is asking: “have we not got this all out of proportion? Is not the Archbishop of Canterbury designate kind, caring, pastoral and orthodox in other areas?” Many have said so. But all pastors or shepherds besides being kind and caring also have to fight the wolf (John 10.12). And wolves, we are told, can come in the form of those within the church who “distort the truth” (Acts 20.30).

On sex in general Rowan Williams has views that are neo-liberal. He dispenses both with the “simple traditional biblical” teaching and the “conventional wisdom of the right-thinking, liberal-minded person of today.” He then says: “Our main question about how we lead our sexual lives should be neither ‘Am I keeping the rules?’ nor ‘Am I being sincere and non-hurtful?’ but ‘How much am I prepared for this to signify?’” (*Open to Judgement*, pp161-167). That is a good example of some of his theologizing (and not just in the areas of moral or social ethics). He denies biblical orthodoxy; he also denies the old liberal orthodoxy; and trying to be generous to both positions, he then builds a third neo-liberal way that, whatever else it may be, is another non biblical way.

What, then, are his views on homosexual sex in particular? He says: “I recognise I am in the minority, so I am cautious of making this a great campaigning issue. [But] I am not convinced that a homosexual has to be celibate in every imaginable circumstance” (Interview, *Anglican Media* Sydney). Why does he hold this position? He answers: “I think my own developing sense over the last twenty years has come partly from being spiritual director to people of the homosexual orientation ... I did come to a point where I could no longer say the biblical account answers all the questions we have or want to ask” (Interview, *Anglican Media* Melbourne).

How do we read the Bible?

So how does Rowan Williams handle the “biblical account”. He says:

“We read neither with a kind of blind and thoughtless obedience to every word of scripture, as if it simply

represented the mind of God, nor do we read with that rather priggish sensibility that desires to look down on the authors of scripture as benighted savages. We read with a sense of our own benighted savagery in receiving God's gift, and our solidarity with those writers of scripture caught up in the blazing fire of God's gift who yet struggle with it, misapprehend it, and misread it" (*Open to Judgement*, p159).

The net result of all this is that Rowan Williams is now one of the intellectual leaders associated with gay apologetics in the church world-wide. While not campaigning himself, he thus lends great weight to those who are campaigning. For example, he lends his name to the biannual journal *Theology and Sexuality* as a member of its editorial board. In the current edition (March 2002) the first three articles are "Men, Muscles and Zombies"; "A Place for Porn in a Gay Spiritual Economy"; and "Finding God in the Heart-Genital Connection: Joe Kramer's Erotic Christianity". "A Place for Porn" is itself utterly pornographic, while "Finding God" is about workshops and retreats that even other gay scholars think are "excuses for sexual orgies" (p41).

Misleading my servants

The cameo of the church in Thyatira (Revelation 2.20) makes it quite plain that "teaching" that "misleads my servants into sexual immorality" is a doctrinal line in the sand. It is not a secondary matter. The good Christians of Thyatira were "tolerating" such teaching; and the risen Christ condemned them. That is why there must be prayer either for a real change in the thinking and teaching of Rowan Williams or else for him, somehow, still not to become Archbishop.

We are, indeed, talking about a church defining issue. It is also of great social importance. In the wider world the legitimising of homosexual sex has been a motor for the destabilizing of the whole of western sexual culture. That destabilization has led to the belief that sexual drives need unfettered expression; the systematic deconstruction of the "married family"; abortions; sexually transmitted diseases; and single parents. The resulting outcomes, as social science is now confirming, are dire for children (especially), but also for adults and society at large. For the church to grant further legitimacy would surely be wicked. Rather the church needs to speak the truth (in love) about Christ, the gospel and his way of living.

An impossible situation

The Church of England is being placed in an impossible position. Its canons require that a Bishop (or Archbishop) must "teach and uphold sound and wholesome doctrine and ... banish and drive away all erroneous and strange opinions" (C18). But the Archbishop of Canterbury designate seems himself a source of "erroneous and strange opinions". For these are defined by "the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the 39 Articles of Religion, *The Book of Common Prayer*, and the Ordinal" (A5).

The Ordinal, however, also imposes a duty on every Priest/Presbyter also to "drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God's Word." Pray for those of us who are seeking to fulfil that duty.

I wrote the above in the middle of August. Then in the middle of September the Reform Council, of which I am a member, met. Reform is a campaigning group of evangelical clergy and laity who want to see the Church of England return to its biblical roots. There was agreement over the seriousness of the situation. So the Council issued a statement together with this preamble.

The Reform Council ...

... met on 17 September for the first time since the announcement that Rowan Williams was to be the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Council was aware that many Reform members, shocked by this appointment, were looking to the Council for a lead. Whilst intending to continue consultation amongst the whole network of Reform members and to bring these concerns to our national conference next month, the full Council, after its deliberations and in its own right, has agreed to make the following statement:

"Since the announcement of the Archbishop of Wales, Rowan Williams, as the next Archbishop of Canterbury, we have spent time in further study of his public statements and published writings and in consultation world-wide. We have long been disturbed at the steady growth of unorthodoxy, currently so focused on the growing acceptability of homosexual practice in the Anglo-Anglican churches of the Anglican Communion including the Church of England. Such sexual relations are contrary to the teaching of Scripture, as the General Synod overwhelmingly voted in 1987

and as the Bishops' *Issues in Human Sexuality* clearly reaffirmed. Accordingly we and others world-wide were deeply dismayed at the appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury of a man who was known for his non-biblical views on homosexual relationships. Even shortly before the appointment he publicly said that he is 'not convinced that a homosexual has to be celibate in every imaginable circumstance' and again we can 'no longer say that the Biblical account answers all the questions we have or want to ask' (Anglican Media, Sydney, 2002). In *Open to Judgement* (1994 reprinted 2001, page 159) he has said that there are 'writers of Scripture caught up in the blazing fire of God's gift who yet struggle with it, misapprehend it, and misread it'. Furthermore, the retiring Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, has claimed at the recent (and his last) Anglican Consultative Council meeting in Hong Kong that liberal views and policies on homosexuality have led the Anglican Communion to a situation of 'crisis proportions'.

Therefore:

1. In view of the publicly expressed opinions of Rowan Williams on homosexual practice, sadly **we cannot** welcome his appointment as the next Archbishop of Canterbury and leader of the world-wide Anglican Communion.

2. For the avoidance of doubt, and following the Lambeth Conference 1998 Resolution 1.10, where homosexual practice was rejected 'as incompatible with Scripture' and where it was voted that the Conference, 'in view of the teaching of the Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in life-long union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called for marriage,' **we ask** Rowan Williams whether he is willing and able, personally and publicly, to affirm, teach and defend:

- a. The received teaching of the church that all its members are to abstain from sexual relations outside holy (heterosexual) matrimony.
- b. The need for appropriate discipline* within the church where there are sexual relations outside holy (heterosexual) matrimony.
- c. The practice of ordaining only those who themselves will teach, and seek to model in their own lives, the received teaching of the church that all its members are to abstain from sexual relations outside holy (heterosexual) matrimony.

3. In the light of the teaching of Scripture and in the light of the fact that, as the retiring Archbishop of Canterbury has said at the Anglican Consultative Council (and as we have been saying for 10 years), the Anglican church is being driven 'towards serious fragmentation' due to unorthodox teaching and practice with regard to homosexuality, regretfully **we ask** Rowan Williams, even at this late stage, if he is unwilling or unable, personally and publicly, to make these affirmations, to withdraw his acceptance of the nomination to be the next Archbishop of Canterbury, for the sake of the Church's gospel witness and unity."

* 'appropriate discipline' can be exercised by private discussion with the person or persons concerned, by public denunciation of such behaviours when there is no repentance, and, extremely, by church legal action if judged 'appropriate'.

This statement was sent to Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Wales, on 20 September, with a covering letter from the Reform Council Chairman.

Covering letter from the Reform Council Chairman

Dear Archbishop, As national Chairman, I have the sad lot of enclosing a statement that the Council of Reform agreed to release after its recent meeting (17 September 2002). The Council found itself sadly unable to be reassured, in mood or mind, by words received or studied over the weeks of the summer. I am personally heavy-hearted that the "iron sharpening iron", of which I wrote in my brief note of 10 August, has had to turn from dialogue to statement. It speaks for itself.

All I would ask for my part is that you try to understand that, however much you disagree with us (and your letter to me of July 22nd gives me hope that you may understand), we deeply regret having to make this statement. But it is made because we believe that non-Biblical teaching regarding homosexual behaviour (*pace* your article in *The Way Forward?*) is a defining issue. We do not believe it is a secondary matter; and we know that there are very many Anglican believers in England and especially around the world as, for example, you will know from the recent meeting of Anglican leaders in Muslim countries, who believe as we do. For us it feels to be a case of "Here we stand;

we can do no other". We too are among those who "only believe what every priest in the Church of England believed thirty years ago" and who, as well as your fellow Primates, humbly wish to be allowed to "speak the truth in love" to you.

Please understand also that our request for you to withdraw, if you cannot make these affirmations personally and publicly, is not motivated personally, but by our concern and Anglican allegiance to seek to be faithful to Scripture and reject "what is not read therein nor can be proved thereby" and by our concern for the good of the Church.

We will, of course, continue to pray for you. The Lord have mercy on us and on his whole Church.

Yours sincerely, David Banting.

On the 23 September, Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Wales, replied to the Reform Council Chairman.

Reply from Rowan Williams

Dear Mr Banting, Of course I understand that you must do what you believe best for the health of the Church, although it places me in a somewhat difficult position. My personal views are on record, and I have not found reason to change them; not for lack of reflection, believe me. Equally the decision to accept this nomination, not sought by me and not welcome to me, was not taken without reflection and consultation - including consultation with those who would broadly believe as you do: the answers were unanimous. Somehow I have to try and discern the will of God in all this, knowing all too well the risks to the unity of the Church which you mention. But my very conviction that this should not be a defining issue makes it impossible for me to respond as you would want, in all conscience. I can and I do state what is the majority teaching of the Church, and I will exercise the discipline of the Church as I am bound to do. But I can't go beyond this and say that I believe what I do not believe. Nor do I want to set a precedent of publicly affirming more than what the canons require in terms of allegiance to the Scriptures, the Articles and the Creeds.

I accept that this is not personal, and I appreciate the courtesy and kindness of your letter. I am distressed that this will embitter an already difficult situation, and I join in your prayers for our church.

Yours in Christ, + Rowan C.

Comment

Some may be forgiven for thinking that Rowan Williams is now ready to affirm, teach and defend "the majority teaching of the Church" i.e. the teaching of Lambeth 1998. Indeed, on the BBC Radio 4 *Sunday* programme on 29 September, Rod Thomas, the Reform Press Officer, was being interviewed by Roger Bolton the presenter, who said at one point: "Well, the Archbishop has said in a letter, I think to one of your colleagues, 'my conviction is that this should not be a defining issue ... [but] I can and I do state what is the majority teaching of the church.' Is that enough for you?" No! Rowan Williams is simply saying that he can and does "state *what* is the majority teaching" (when asked). It does not mean he agrees with it. Indeed, he says: "But I can't go beyond this and say that I believe what I do not believe."

In his letter to the Primates of the Anglican Communion, sent on 23 July 2002, he made it clear that he personally does not agree with "the mind of the overwhelming majority in the Communion"; but as that is a personal view "he does not have the freedom to prescribe belief for the Church at large". So he will abide by the current discipline of the Anglican Communion (and presumably not ordain gays). In the meantime, while he and his minority still think that gay sex is compatible with Christian discipleship, his "main hope will be to try and maintain a mutually respectful climate for [continuing] reflection, in the sort of shared prayerful listening to Scripture envisaged by Lambeth". But as he has told us, when *he* listens to Scripture he thinks he hears people sometimes who themselves "misapprehend" and "misread".

Would anyone ever ask a believer in fox hunting to head up an anti-hunting campaign? He may say, "I can and do state what your views are (when asked) and, for the time being, will not hunt myself." Of course, he would not be appointed. The campaigners want someone who believes in their cause and who will lead enthusiastically, not someone who behind the scenes adds his voice to the pro-hunting lobby and whose main objective is to "maintain a mutually respectful climate for continuing reflection."

Conclusion

Of course, if having sex outside marriage - hetero- or homosexual sex - is something over which Christians can legitimately disagree, there may be strong views held, but it is not a matter of life or death. But the Bible says that how you behave in this area is a matter of life or death - eternal life or eternal death: "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6.9-11). So, were a prospective Archbishop of Canterbury to say publicly that idolatry, theft, greed, drunkenness, slander or swindling were compatible with Christian discipleship, we would say "please do not become Archbishop of Canterbury, Primate of All England and leader of the Anglican Communion." We say the same to a man who says that sexual immorality is compatible with Christian discipleship.