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THE WINDSOR REPORT (PART I)

This is the official name of the Lambeth Commission Report. There have been many analyses of the report written over the past several weeks from many different viewpoints Mine here will offer nothing new, but I would like to put it in perspective for us at St. John's.

The report is comprehensive and carefully worded. In a nutshell, it offers a way for the Anglican Communion to proceed positively and with hope and charity. But it is not without defect, and in this respect it carries with it the inherent difficulty of most contemporary Christianity.

The framers of the document have tried to be objective and fair in their appraisal. And in doing so they have acted as mediators between what we may refer to, inadequately, as the two sides of the current crisis: the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada on the one side and the majority of Primates, who declared themselves in broken or impaired communion with those churches, on the other side.

The problem with this honest attempt at mediation is that it can prescribe only a process by which the Communion may draw back from rupture, while simply assuming the authority of the Church Catholic in Scripture, tradition, and reason. We may be encouraged that the memory of this authority remains in the Anglican Church while it has been seriously diminished in other Protestant churches, but the very serious problem continues of what indeed the authority itself says, and how to bring this authority to bear on the life of the Communion as a whole.

We must recognize, for instance, that the authors of the Report do not speak of this authority articulated as the historic formularies of the Anglican Way, namely, the Prayer Book, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, and the Ordinal. And so the result is that to the extent that our communion tries to achieve a theological resolution to any issue, we are left standing on a limb which is attached neither to trunk nor root.

This problem of forgetting our historic formularies is really the most serious problem of the Anglican Church and ethos worldwide. To remember them is not to deny the possibility, and indeed the necessity, of greater understanding and creative theological development. But it is to say that the root and trunk are essential to whatever growth takes place.

In one sense, the report itself acknowledges this, by claiming that theological development must be in keeping with Scripture and tradition, but again it has no foundation on which to lay such a claim apart from the historic formularies.

My point is that prescribing a process, and acknowledging Christian authority, does not actually bring to bear that authority, as was once the case historically, when the Communion of Anglican Churches could point to the Prayer Book, the Thirty-nine Articles, and the Ordinal as definitive teaching of the Scriptures on the essentials of the Christian faith, and hence the locus from which to begin. These were our inheritance of mind and heart. It has been our Lord's intention from the beginning that we love him with all our heart and soul and mind. The current abyss of theological memory and understanding threatens to eclipse whatever we might assume in faith and intend in love.

The positive aspect to the recommendations of the Windsor Report fall precisely in an ancient idea and doctrine. The Episcopal Church is reprimanded, diplomatically but firmly, for proceeding with its actions outside of the "bonds of affection" which enable communion. In other words, the Episcopal Church knowingly defied what the current structures of the Anglican Communion had declared on the issues at hand (most notably, the Lambeth Conference of 1998 and the Primates Meeting of 2003); and therefore, they committed a sin against charity, which is most serious indeed. And so the Commission makes carefully worded yet strong recommendations to help heal the rupture of the "bonds of affection" which the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada have caused.

They recommend that (and here I quote):

1. the Episcopal Church (USA) be invited to express its regret that the proper constraints of the bonds of affection were breached in the events surrounding the election and consecration of a bishop for the see of New Hampshire, and for the consequences which followed, and that such an expression of regret would represent the desire of the Episcopal Church (USA) to remain within the Communion.
2. pending such expression of regret, those who took part as consecrators of Gene Robinson should be invited to consider in all conscience whether they should withdraw themselves from representative [*italics mine*] functions in the Anglican Communion. We urge this in order to create the space necessary to enable the healing of the Communion. We advise that in the formation of their consciences, those involved consider the common good of the Anglican Communion, and seek advice through their primate and the Archbishop of Canterbury. We urge all members of the Communion to accord appropriate respect to such conscientious decisions.
3. the Episcopal Church (USA) be invited to effect a moratorium on the election and consent to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate who is living in a same gender union until some new consensus in the Anglican Communion emerges.

While very carefully worded, these recommendations do actually carry weight, placing ECUSA clearly at fault, and yet providing a way in charity to return. But there is more that should be said. And I promise I will not say too much.

(to be continued)

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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