

Lambeth I.10 and all that

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The Archbishop of the Anglican Church in Wales explores some of the underlying principles in the current debates on sexuality.

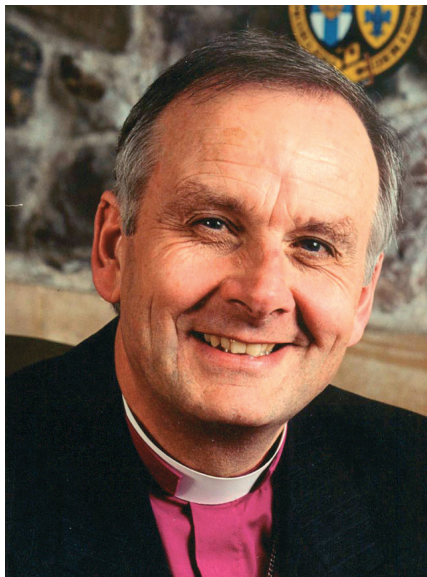
There can be little doubt that the 1998 Lambeth Resolution on Human Sexuality – Lambeth I.10 as it has come to be known – has had a profound effect on the Anglican Communion. In fact you could be pardoned for wondering whether the Anglican Communion has, since then, been interested in any other topic, because it has dominated the agendas of Provinces, meetings of Primates and of the Anglican Consultative Council. The ordination of a practising homosexual as a Bishop in the USA and the blessing of same sex relationships in Canada might not have had the repercussions they have had, if the Lambeth Conference in 1998 had not had such an acrimonious debate about sexuality. Why has this resolution rather than any other caused such problems: after all there were 63 pages of resolutions at the 1998 Lambeth Conference?

Before looking at this it is worth remembering that the Lambeth bishops were asked to choose from four major

topics during the conference. The headings were: *Called to Full Humanity; Called to Live and Proclaim the Good News; Called to be a Faithful Church in a Plural World; and Called to be One*. In other words the four main topics dealt with were human affairs, mission, interfaith, and unity issues. Human sexuality was one subject area, within the human affairs topic, which also examined themes such as human rights, human dignity, the environment, questions about modern technology, euthanasia, international debt and economic justice. Sexuality then was one topic among many others, but I suspect that by now no one remembers that. I.10 seems to be the only resolution that counts. People have also forgotten that the resolution

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ought not to be seen in isolation from the discussion that those bishops who studied the theme of human sexual relations had during the three weeks of the conference. This discussion is summarised in the conference report and puts the resolution in context. Different bishops reported on the four main topics and the sub topics within them and brought forward resolutions to the plenary session of bishops. The resolutions on human sexuality however were the only ones that were altered on the floor during the plenary discussion, which illustrates how high feelings were running. What then does Lambeth 1.10 say? It is worth quoting:

- a. It commends to the Church the sub-section report on human sexuality;
- b. In view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage;
- c. Recognises that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these are members of the Church and are seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church, and God's transforming power for the living of their lives and the ordering of relationships. We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ;
- d. While rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all, irrespective of sexual orientation, and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within

marriage and any trivialisation and commercialisation of sex;

e. Cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions;

f. Requests the Primates and the ACC to establish a means of monitoring the work done on the subject of human sexuality in the Communion and to share statements and resources among us;

g. Notes the significance of the Kuala Lumpur Statement on Human Sexuality and the concerns expressed in Resolutions IV.26, V.1, V.10, V.23 and V.35 on the authority of Scripture in matters of marriage and sexuality and asks the Primates and the ACC to include them in their monitoring process.

In fact of course little attention has been paid to most of these seven points. Whereas the report commends faithfulness in marriage in lifelong union and abstinence as the right choice for the unmarried, the wider church has not sought to make an issue out of these. Some of the Anglican Provinces in Great Britain allow re-marriage in church after divorce and the majority of people who come to be

married in church in Britain have cohabited. What has been highlighted since 1998 is (d) ‘the rejection of homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture’ and (e) ‘Cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions or ordaining those involved in same gender unions’. In other words the Anglican Communion has concentrated on two subsections of a subsection of one of the four major topics that were discussed and this has given the impression that nothing else of importance took place or matters!

The Lambeth Conference history

1998 was not the first time that a Lambeth Conference dealt with the topic of human sexuality. In 1908, reaffirming an 1888 resolution, it forbade divorce except in the case of adultery and refused to sanction re-marriage during the lifetime of an existing partner. It reaffirmed this in 1920, 1930 and 1968. These resolutions spoke in terms of the indissolubility of marriage and refused to countenance either re-marriage in church or even services of blessing by the Church, urging people (in 1968) to remain in unhappy marriages rather than divorce. In 1998 however, the resolution says nothing about divorce and re-marriage only that ‘it upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union’. In

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other words, it makes a positive rather than a negative statement.

Similarly, Lambeth resolutions were more accommodating to contraception in 1958 and 1968 than in 1920.

Whereas in 1920 warning was given against ‘the use of unnatural means for the avoidance of contraception’ by 1958 and 1968 the resolutions accepted that family planning was natural and that this was a matter to be left to the individual conscience. Open disagreement was expressed with *Humanae Vitae*. As far as homosexuality is concerned it passed resolutions on this topic in 1978 and 1988 as well as 1998. In 1978 it asked for ‘a deep and dispassionate study of homosexuality to include both the teaching of Scripture and the results of scientific and medical research’. It reiterated this even more fully in 1988 when it asked for an account to be taken of ‘biological, genetic and psychological research undertaken by other agencies as well as the socio-cultural factors that lead to the different attitudes in the Provinces of our communion’. It also spoke about the need to listen to the stories of gay

and lesbian people in the church. If one looks at the 1998 resolution against this background it is obvious that it is a much harsher resolution than those passed in 1978 and 1988, for it says nothing about taking into account scientific and social factors. Whereas the contraception resolutions have become more permissive with time and resolutions on marriage have been expressed positively and not negatively, the opposite has been the case with resolutions on homosexuality.

The underlying principles

There are wider principles at stake here and I would like to examine them in turn. They are:

1. The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture
2. The nature of Anglicanism
3. Decision making within the Anglican Communion
4. The place of Lambeth Resolutions
5. The sexual issue in a wider context

All of these are enormous questions in themselves and all I can do is to touch

upon them, but by doing so we can see how any one issue has ramifications in all kinds of ways, which is why feelings are running so high within the Communion.

1. The authority and interpretation of Scripture

The central issue is the use and interpretation of Scripture, since the critics of development of interpretation claim that Scripture must be followed without deviance.

The Anglican understanding is summed up in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. The sixth article of religion states that the Old and the New Testament ‘contain all things necessary to salvation’. They are the word of God, not because God dictated every word in them but because the Church came to believe that God inspired its human authors through his spirit to reveal his plan of salvation for the world. The Holy Scriptures provide the basis and guiding principles for our relationship with God and they do so through narrative, law, prophecy and poetry – through quite a diverse collection of documents written by a variety of authors at different times and places. Here are to be found the responses of God’s people to God’s saving acts which come to a climax in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus who for Christians is God’s human face. The

New Testament bears witness to Jesus and the effect he had on the early Christian community. You might then think that if we want to know what the Bible says about a particular topic all we have to do is just look it up, see what it says and then apply it. The snag is that that method of reading Scripture can lead to problems, e.g. Exodus 21.15 reads, ‘whoever hits his father or mother shall be put to death’; Exodus 21.17 reads, ‘whoever curses his father or mother shall be put to death’. Deuteronomy 25.11-12 says, ‘a woman who tries to protect her husband in a fight by seizing his enemy’s genitals should have her hand cut off’. Deuteronomy 21.18-21 says, ‘a stubborn rebellious boy who drinks and eats to excess and refuses to obey his parents should be stoned to death’. Deuteronomy 23.19 forbids taking interest on any money that is loaned.

Now I have chosen some rather extreme examples to make the point that we do not observe all biblical injunctions. We are selective in the way in which we treat the Bible because we do not regard all its injunctions in the same way and as if they all have to be obeyed. The question is how does one interpret Holy Scripture? The Declaration of Assent taken by all clergy before they take up office puts it in this way: ‘The Church in Wales is part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic

Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the Catholic Creeds, which faith the church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation'. In other words it grounds itself on the Bible and the traditional Creeds – but also recognises that these truths have to be interpreted afresh to each generation. That is where the problem begins. The question is what can and cannot be changed? What can and cannot be disregarded? Put another way what is the role of reason in Anglican theology? Or how does the Spirit lead us into truth, whilst at the same time enabling us to be true to both Scripture and tradition? In short how do we come to a belief system?

Over the centuries the Church has opposed things which are clearly advocated by Holy Scripture and allowed acts that are proscribed by it. In the Book of Genesis both accounts of creation restrict human beings to being vegetarians. After the flood however, the eating of animals is allowed, but their blood is not to be consumed. The Council of Jerusalem in the Book of Acts upheld this as being binding on Gentile converts to Christianity. The Canons of the early church continued the ban. Augustine however, argued for a relaxation of the ban and Article Nineteen of the Thirty

Nine Articles of Religion says that the Jerusalem Church erred in this and other matters. Some churches today still forbid the consumption of blood on the basis of the ban after the flood and the ban imposed by the Council of Jerusalem, but most Western Churches have set it aside.

Slavery is accepted without demur in the Old Testament and Leviticus 25 sets out the rules for having slaves. The New Testament tolerates slavery and Paul merely asks for slaves to be treated well. He does not ask for slavery to be prohibited. Yet the Church in time came to see slavery as morally wrong. It is not something that we would want to defend on scriptural grounds. We now argue that our understanding of the moral law informed by respect for individual rights in the light of the Gospel demands that we abolish slavery. However many Christians quoted Scripture to defend slavery against those who wished to abolish it.

Or take the question of divorce. Jesus forbade divorce in the strongest possible terms and re-marriage after it even more strongly. He says, in the Gospel of Mark 10.10-12 'whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery'. When his disciples question him as to why Moses allowed divorce, Jesus responded

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that it was because of peoples' hardness of heart that it was allowed but that the original intention of God was that there should be no divorce and no re-marriage. In other words Jesus recognised that Moses allowed it but based his (Jesus') own prohibition on another part of the Pentateuch, thus showing an inconsistency even within those five books. We will leave to one side the whole argument about whether Jesus was legislating and whether his statement on divorce was any different from the rest of his sayings and teaching on moral matters, and concentrate instead at what the Gospel of Matthew has to say on this issue. In it, there is a significant difference from Mark's Gospel as far as divorce and re-marriage are concerned. In Matthew 5.32 and 19.9 Jesus says, 'everyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of *porneia*, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery'. In other words there is apparently an insertion here by the Matthean Church to the original teaching of Jesus expressed in Mark's Gospel, allowing divorce for *porneia*. Obviously then Matthew's Church did

not think that Jesus was legislating for all time and modified the teaching of Jesus on divorce. *Porneia* for Matthew, whatever that means – perhaps adultery – is sufficient ground for divorce. Moreover the Orthodox Church has always permitted divorce and remarriage for certain reasons – adultery, suspected adultery, attempted murder or insanity. In the reformed tradition divorce is allowed and remarriage allowed in church according to the discretion of the pastor and many Anglican Provinces have moved in this direction in recent years as well. So here is a clear move away both inside the New Testament and since, from the clear teaching of Jesus. One of the arguments that we have used in the Anglican Church is that we need to look at the New Testament as a whole. In it Jesus reached out in forgiveness to those who had failed and allowed people a second chance. This therefore has precedence over his literal words in a particular context.

The way we have been shaped and formed as Christians and the context in which we live affects our interpretation of Scripture. Different people interpret



Archbishop Barry talks to some young members of the Anglican Communion (Sion Brynach/RB of the Church in Wales)

Scripture in different ways and often, as I have just shown, the plain text of Scripture has been put aside by the Church in response to the needs of the world and its current understanding of the mind of Christ. In doing so, the Church has done no more than Jesus did in his own day by ignoring parts of the Old Testament that required lepers, prostitutes, gentiles, sinners and others regarded as unclean to be excluded from God's presence.

2. The nature of Anglicanism

The Anglican Church has from its inception been a broad and comprehensive church. It has often been called the Church of the *Via Media* – the middle way. That certainly doesn't mean that it is halfway between Roman

Catholicism on the one hand and the Protestant Reformed tradition on the other, but rather a Church which draws its insights from all kinds of places and is not too anxious about pinning people down too precisely. If one reads Cranmer on the theology of the Eucharist, one could at times think he was Zwinglian in his emphasis on Holy Communion as just a remembering of a past event. At other times he puts emphasis on the real presence of Christ in the elements and at other times on the real presence of Christ in the heart of the believer. What kind of presence is there in the Eucharist? You see the dilemma in the words of administration of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, which are actually a combination of what Cranmer set out in his 1549 Prayer

Book and his later more reformed 1552 Prayer Book. The words are, ‘the body or blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving.’ That is a fairly comprehensive statement and it could embrace a number of viewpoints. The Elizabethan Church followed Elizabeth I’s injunction that she did not want to make windows into men’s souls. There has always been room for a variety of interpretations about a great number of things in the Anglican tradition, for instance the place of bishops. Are bishops of the essence of the Church i.e. no bishop no Church? Are they of the *bene esse* of the Church i.e. are they just a way of exercising good oversight, one that may be less problematic than other methods of church government or are they of the *plene esse* of the Church i.e. the Church can only be found in its completeness or fullness where there is an episcopate as part of the order of ministry. All three viewpoints are held by different Anglicans.

The same variety of viewpoints is held on moral questions. There is no one Anglican line, on for example going to war. Some bishops have in the past blessed naval nuclear submarines and others have been pacifists. Christians disagreed about the ethics of going to

war against Iraq. To some it was justified because of the brutality of Saddam Hussein’s regime towards Iraq’s population for eighteen years in defiance of UN resolutions. To others it was a violation of the principles of a just war – taking pre-emptive action against a nation which was not about to attack us; whilst for other Christians any reason for waging any war against any nation is wrong. In fact Lambeth resolutions have consistently stated that ‘war as a method of settling international disputes is incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus’.

After prayer, struggle and reflection devout Christians and Anglicans have come to widely different conclusions on a whole variety of doctrinal and moral issues, conclusions which to some of their fellow Christians seem at the very least wrong headed and at worst perverse. So here we are as Christians struggling with the same data, reading the same Scriptures, having to listen to one another as fellow members of the body of Christ and yet coming to different conclusions. That is what an imperfect body of Christ is like – recognising that all our understandings are partial, provisional and that we have to be open to one another and remain in communion with one another.

Is that possible? In a lecture at the Lambeth Conference of 1998 Archbishop Rowan Williams put it like this. ‘In the body of Christ, I am in communion with

past Christians whom I regard as profoundly and damagingly in error – with those who justified slavery, torture or the execution of heretics. They justified these things on the basis of the same Bible as the one I read, and these were people who prayed – probably more intensely than I ever shall. How do I relate to them? How much easier if I did not have to acknowledge that this is part of my community, the life I share; that these are the consequences that may be drawn from the faith I hold along with them. I do not seek simply to condemn them but to stand alongside them in my own prayer, not knowing how, in the strange economy of the Body of Christ, their life and mine may work together for our common salvation. I do not think for a moment that they are right on matters such as those I have mentioned, but I acknowledge that they “knew” what their own concrete Christian communities taught them to know, just as I “know” what I have learned in the same concrete and particular way. When I stand in God’s presence or at the Lord’s Table, they are part of the company to which I belong’. In other words we have to live with differences of viewpoints on a whole range of moral issues.

3. Decision making within the Anglican Communion

We do not have a centralised system of government in the Anglican Church.

The Archbishop of Canterbury is not our Pope. Bishops at Lambeth Conferences do not have authority to legislate. The Anglican Consultative Council is precisely that – a consultative body. Nor do the Primates meeting together have authority to legislate either. The Anglican family and the Anglican identity is defined by our acceptance of Scripture, the Creeds, the two dominical sacraments and the historic episcopate locally adapted – what has been called the Lambeth Quadrilateral. Each Province is autonomous. Obviously we have to be sensitive to one another’s needs and to our wider inheritance of faith but at the end of the day we are all self governing Provinces with our own system of choosing bishops, our own synodical procedures and our own way of dealing with moral issues. In other words, as Anglicans we believe that we learn our faith in a particular place, be that in Wales, England, Canada or Africa. That doesn’t mean that we are swamped by the local culture, but it does mean that Christian communities in different parts of the world have different emphases. Thus Provinces have moved at different paces with regard to the ordination of women both to the priesthood and to the episcopate. The Church in Nigeria tolerates polygamy in some circumstances because it is found in the Bible whereas we in the West believe in monogamous marriage

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relationships. This is part of what it means to belong to a worldwide church, which is not uniform or monochrome.

4. The place of Lambeth Resolutions

Lambeth Resolutions are not meant to be prescriptive – rules binding on all Provinces of the Anglican Communion. At Lambeth, the Bishops of the Communion agree on the importance of certain matters and commend them for study and discussion and possible implementation to the wider church. Lambeth 1998 dealt with things such as the universal declaration of human rights, religious freedom and tolerance, uprooted and displaced persons, justice for women and children, the plight of people in various parts of the globe, nuclear weapons, landmines and international debt. Which Province and diocese has taken to heart the challenge to fund an international development programme by giving 0.7% of annual total diocesan income to this cause?

5. The sexual issue in a wider context

This resolution deeply affects the mission and ministry of the church.

After Lambeth 1998 the then Archbishop of Canterbury set up a group of bishops to look at issues in human sexuality. That group came to the conclusion that ‘the legislative process was an inadequate way to discern the mind of Christ in some of the sensitive issues that face us as we continue to grow as a communion of Churches. What we need is face to face conversations across provincial lines’.

The World Council of Churches in Geneva has also been looking at the whole issue of human sexuality and set up a group after its Assembly in Harare in 1998 to provide what it called ‘Space for discussion, debate and analysis.’ A number of consultations were held on this issue at Bossey where individual participants were able to be open and vulnerable to one another and were able to share reflections. It concluded that, ‘the mainstreaming of positions and the production of authoritative statements is counter productive and deepens the rifts within and among churches. What there is need for is space for encounters, analysis, dialogue’. In other words the WCC concurs with the post Lambeth bishops about the most creative way forward being through conversations

rather than through strident statements. Moreover the WCC examined every report that any member church had produced on sexuality and arrived at the following conclusions:

a. Human sexuality is not simply about matters of same sex relations.

Sexuality is basic to all human beings and affects all of us as at points of extreme vulnerability.

b. Most Churches of the WCC acknowledged discontinuity between traditional church positions on human sexuality and the reality of the world we live in. In other words there is a gap between what we say as churches and how Christians actually behave.

c. Most of the church statements produced for the WCC, whilst regarding the Bible as the main foundation for ethical decision-making, recognised the need for further study and also the provisionality of many church statements. In other words the approach was a humble one. Whilst a central place was given to Scripture by all the major Churches, there was disagreement as to whether the Bible alone determines our ethics or whether tradition and reason have a role to

play and how you hold these in balance. Most church statements were willing to engage in a critical approach to the Bible and to look at texts in their cultural contexts rather than accepting them as God's literal and final words on this topic.

d. All the statements affirmed human sexuality as intrinsically good and as a gift to be celebrated. This was a departure from the view of St Augustine, adopted by the Church for centuries, that sex and sexuality were really a curse.

e. Sin should be seen in the context of our total response to the love of God or our failure to respond to that love and not be restricted to sexual matters. In other words sexual sins are not the only sins and are not even the main sins.

f. Theology has to be open to the possibility of encountering God's revelation of truth in new and novel ways – that's what the doctrine of the Spirit is about after all, because the Church has in the past changed its mind on many topics.

g. Debates and confrontation sometimes have an ideological tone and what is lost in the noise is the

person. In the consultations at the WCC we were reminded that there is a mystery and sacramentality at the centre of the life of each of us, and all of us are fragile creatures and need to be handled with care. What is needed is for us to see one another through the eyes of God since we are made in his image and the God we believe in is a God who is interested in our restoration and healing.

The Anglican Communion has a great deal to learn about this method of discourse. No proper communication or conversations have really taken place in the Anglican Communion – just the assertion and counter assertion of differing viewpoints. What kind of witness has that given to the world about our way of engaging with God and one another? The Church claims to be the Body of Christ, where members are urged to look not to their own interests but to the interests of other

members of the Body (*Ephesians 4.2-3*). It most truly witnesses to the Gospel when it tries to serve Christ in the other person. In other words there ought to be about us a selfless attention to the other because of God's selfless attention toward us. That is the heart of the Gospel. In an attempt to state views stridently on this one topic we have missed something fundamental as a Communion on the core values of the Gospel. Or to use Jesus' own picturesque language 'we have strained at gnats and swallowed camels', for we seem to have forgotten that we live in a world ravaged by bloodshed, poverty and disease. We are in danger in the Anglican Communion of making this sexual and relational issue, the only real issue that counts – almost the defining issue for who is and is not an Anglican or even a Christian. If we do that then we are in danger of failing to take seriously both the central values of our Gospel and the traditions of our Church.