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The Church, the Bible, and the Body of Christ

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Dr. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, faces an incredible challenge as he attempts to hold the worldwide Anglican Communion together. The communion is torn apart by debates over sexuality, biblical authority, and a range of related issues. Nevertheless, homosexuality stands as the most divisive issue of contention.

In the current issue of *The Christian Century*, the Archbishop raises some basic issues about the church. Though he offers no developed ecclesiology, his thinking does point to at least two reasons why his communion is having such difficulty holding together — a wrong understanding of diversity and a weak affirmation of Scripture.

Williams refers to the church as “a community we can trust.” As he explains, “Just as we can trust God because God has no agenda that is not for our good, so we can trust the church because it is the sort of community it is, a community of active peacemaking and peacekeeping in which no one exists in isolation or grows up in isolation or suffers in isolation.” So good, so far, but surely there must be more than this?

The archbishop refers to the New Testament imagery of the church as the body of Christ. Dr. Williams explains this image with eloquence:

The New Testament sees the church as a community in which each person has a gift that only he or she can give into the common life. We Christians are so used to the imagery the Bible uses, especially the great metaphor of Christ's body, that we forget just how radical and comprehensive is the vision of a community of universal giftedness. The ancient world had sometimes used the image of the body to describe a society in which there were different functions, a very natural use for such language. But it was left to Christians to reconceive this in terms of different gifts, and to draw out the further revolutionary implication that the frustration of any one member is the frustration of all because then there is something that is not being properly given. Someone has not been granted the freedom to offer what only that individual can give to the whole.

But that very powerful statement is followed by this:

When St. Paul speaks about the church as the body of Christ, especially in his letters to Christians in Rome and Corinth, this is what is at the forefront of his mind. The church is a diverse community, but its diversity is not just a natural diversity of temperaments or preferences—we trivialize the idea if that's all there is to it. It has a diversity of gifts given by the Spirit, a diversity of relationships with God, we might say, out of which come diverse perspectives on God and diverse ways of making God's work real for each other.

The problem does not lie with the idea of diversity itself. Indeed, the New Testament presents the grand vision that God delights in bringing persons from a diversity of racial, ethnic, social, and linguistic identities into the Church. When the Church denies or forgets this it forgets or denies its own identity as the body of Christ.

The problem is found in Dr. Williams' celebration of “diverse perspectives on God and diverse ways of making God's work real for each other.”

What exactly does this mean? At face value, it is a celebration of theological diversity. Just how diverse can our “perspectives on God” be and we remain part of the Church? The following language is less clear (“diverse ways of making God’s work real for each other”), but it also seems to imply a celebration of theological and doctrinal diversity.

While the New Testament revels in the bringing together of persons from different nations, ethnicities, races, and languages into the one body of the redeemed, it does not celebrate theological diversity. To the contrary, the church is warned to protect the pattern of sound words, to contend for the faith once for all delivered, and to stand unified by our allegiance to one God, one faith, and one baptism.

Does Dr. Williams mean that the church should celebrate the fact that some members believe in a God who hates the practice of homosexuality while others believe that God has no problem with the same? This is no abstract question. Indeed, it is the question that is tearing his communion asunder.

The archbishop also addressed the authority and inspiration of the Bible:

It’s worth taking a moment to clarify some of the misunderstandings that can arise for Christians about the Bible. It is, we often say, the Word of God; but it is the Word of God not because it is the primary and central witness in history to God—Jesus Christ is that—but because it is the primary witness to Jesus Christ. And when it is read in the community of believers, it is used by the Spirit to bring God’s calling alive for us. In other words, it is not a sort of magical text, supernaturally giving us guaranteed information about everything under the sun. What we call its “inspiration” is its capacity to be the vehicle of the Holy Spirit, making Jesus vividly present to our minds and hearts, and so making his challenge and invitation immediate for us.

The problem with this statement is that it wrongly divides the question. Dr. Williams argues that the Bible is the Word of God “because it is the primary witness to Jesus Christ” and not because “it is the primary and central witness in history to God.” Would it not be better to suggest that the Bible is the primary witness to Jesus Christ *because* it is first the Word of God?

What Dr. Williams avoids — and this is no small matter — is the question of the Bible’s essential truth status. Furthermore, even as the Bible is indeed our primary witness to Christ, it is not a mere witness, and the Bible also reveals God’s will to us concerning a host of issues — including morality and sin.

Archbishop Williams helpfully reminds us that the Bible is to be read within the community of the church, not as a privatized text.

But he then argues that the notion of the Bible as a set of books is an essentially modern idea. This is a strange and eccentric argument. Dr. Williams is an established scholar of the early church and he is thoroughly familiar with the history of the canon. So his point must be that modern persons are tempted to read the Bible in isolation from the Church because its availability in a compact book makes it appear like any other book.

These words then follow:

Incidentally, this throws a little light on some of the vexing questions about what the inspiration of the Bible implies. If the Bible is first and foremost a single book between covers—a modern book, essentially—and a book that is there for individuals to read, it is possible to get very agitated about whether it is completely reliable. Its inspiration has to be proved and defended in terms of its obvious correctness about every detail of history or science. If it is shown not to be accurate about this sort of thing, its whole credibility is affected.

But if, on the other hand, it is a collection of texts consistently used by the Holy Spirit to renew and convert the church, something to which the church constantly refers to test its own integrity as it meets and thinks together, the issue of whether it is all totally accurate by modern standards of history or science becomes less important. Genesis may not tell us how the world began in the way a modern cosmologist would, but it tells us what God wants us to know—that we are made by his love and freedom alone. The book of Daniel may be at odds with what we know about Babylonian history, but it tells us what God wants us to know about the imperative of faithfulness in a tyrannical and ungodly empire.

In other words, he appears to argue that the Bible is not inspired to the extent that it can be trusted to be true in all that

it asserts (concerning homosexuality, for example?) but it is true and inspired in that “it tells us what God wants us to know” — which presumably means that God does not want us to know what the Bible reveals about those things we supposedly now know to be wrong.

This is not a theology that can rescue his flock from division. To the contrary, it is a recipe for ecclesiastical disaster. The celebration of theological diversity, added to this very weak view of biblical authority, spells never-ending debates over fundamental doctrines and moral principles.

This cannot be the realization of our Lord’s prayer on the night He was betrayed:

“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” [\[John 17:17-23\]](#)

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