

AlbertMohler.com

Homosexuality and the Anglican Crisis—A Failure of Nerve

The much-awaited “Windsor Report” was released in London on Monday, but the Anglican debate and division over the issue of homosexuality will not be resolved by this report and its recommendations. If anything, the Windsor Report, submitted by a group of leading Anglican figures known as “The Lambeth Commission on Communion” represents a massive failure of nerve. In the end, it may be the final nail in the Anglican coffin.

Tuesday, October 19, 2004

The much-awaited “Windsor Report” was released in London on Monday, but the Anglican debate and division over the issue of homosexuality will not be resolved by this report and its recommendations. If anything, the Windsor Report, submitted by a group of leading Anglican figures known as “The Lambeth Commission on Communion” represents a massive failure of nerve. In the end, it may be the final nail in the Anglican coffin.

Responding to furor over the scandalous actions of member churches in the United States and Canada, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams appointed the Lambeth Commission in 2003, charging the group to submit its report on Anglican unity by September 30, 2004. The report was released to the public on October 18, and conservatives who had hoped for the report to demand a restatement of biblical authority and repentance on the part of the wayward churches were sorely disappointed. In reality, the Windsor Report sacrifices truth on the altar of unity, and in so doing will destroy the last chance for the very unity it so highly prizes.

Archbishop Robin Eames, the Anglican Primate of Ireland and chair of the Lambeth Commission, introduced the report by acknowledging that Anglicans have been divided over issues of human sexuality since the 1970s. Nevertheless, the unprecedented action of the Episcopal Church [USA] in consecrating Gene Robinson, an openly gay man, as the denomination’s first openly homosexual bishop and the action of the Canadian Diocese of New Westminster in developing rites for the recognition of same-sex unions threw the Anglican Communion into what appears to be a catastrophic crisis. Indeed, Archbishop Eames acknowledged that some observers are certain that the Anglican Communion “appears . . . to be set on a voyage of self-destruction.”

From the outset, the commission indicated that it would not consider the issue of homosexuality in itself, nor answer the vexing questions about homosexual ordination or same-sex unions. Instead, the Lambeth Commission focused on the more narrow question of damage to Anglican unity caused by the unilateral and irresponsible action of the American and Canadian churches. Thus, by refusing to deal honestly and directly with the issue of homosexuality, the report inevitably ends up sounding more like an analysis of emotional response and denominational etiquette than an honest consideration of the deadly serious biblical issues at stake.

Addressing the American and Canadian actions, the Windsor Report asserts: “The overwhelming response from other Christians both inside and outside the Anglican family has been to regard these developments as departures from genuine, apostolic Christian faith.” At least eighteen of the thirty-eight provinces of the Anglican Communion have declared the North American actions to be “contrary to biblical teaching.”

The report alleges that “neither the Diocese of New Westminster nor the Episcopal Church [USA] has made a serious attempt to offer an explanation to, or consult meaningfully with, the Communion as a whole about the significant development of theology which alone could justify the recent moves by a diocese or a province.”

The Windsor Report speaks reassuringly about the authority of scripture, recognizing that Anglicanism has recognized Scripture to be “the Church’s supreme authority.” The New Testament, in particular, is understood to be “not a repository of various suggestions for developing one’s private spirituality, but as the collection of books through which the Spirit who was working so powerfully through the apostles would develop and continue that work in the churches.” Dealing with the question of interpretation, and insisting on the necessity that the scripture be seriously studied, the group concluded, “We can no longer be content to drop random texts into arguments, imagining that the point is thereby proved, or indeed to sweep away sections of the New Testament as irrelevant to today’s world, imagining that problems are thereby solved.”

At first glance, that statement appears to be an even-handed statement on behalf of responsible biblical interpretation. As applied within the report, however, the net effect is to undercut biblical authority. The report’s concept of doctrinal development and the so-called “doctrine of reception” makes eventual acceptance of homosexuality a virtual assurance.

The Windsor Report makes specific recommendations concerning the world-wide Anglican Communion and, specifically, the American and Canadian churches. The commission calls for a new body, known as a “Council of Advice” to be established in order to advise the Archbishop of Canterbury on questions of a divisive nature, where the Anglican Communion’s unity may be at stake. The group also proposes the adoption of a document known as “The Anglican Covenant,” designed as a manifesto of common commitment to Anglican ideals and the church’s historic polity.

The Episcopal Church [USA] was “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 CSEE 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.” Likewise, the report called upon the Episcopal Church [USA] to accept a moratorium on the election of any additional openly-gay bishops, and directed the American and Canadian churches to justify their actions. Dealing with the specific question of blessing same-sex unions, the report concludes that respect for Anglican unity requires that the churches “demonstrate to the rest of the Communion why their proposal meets the criteria of scripture, tradition and reason.” The statement went on to advise: “In order to be received as a legitimate development of the tradition, it must be possible to demonstrate how public Rites of Blessing for same sex unions would constitute growth and harmony with the apostolic tradition as it has been received.”

At no point does the Windsor Report call for Bishop Gene Robinson to step down, nor does it call upon the fifty bishops who participated in his consecration to resign. The report does not really come close to punishing the American church, nor does it even call for the American and Canadian churches to repent. Instead, the report simply calls upon the American bishops to express “regret” for hurting the feelings of other Anglicans and for disrupting Anglican unity.

Adding further insult to injury, the report aims heavy artillery at conservative Anglicans who have expressed outrage over the American and Canadian actions. “We deeply regret that the appeals of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the primates, and of this Commission for a period of ‘calm’ to allow the Commission to complete its report have been ignored in a number of quarters, and that a number of primates and provinces have declared themselves in impaired or broken communion with the Episcopal Church [USA] or with the diocese of New Westminster,” the document asserts. As Ted Olsen of ChristianityToday.com commented, “all through the document, there’s a marked contrast between the language used against liberal revisionists and that used against orthodox leaders trying to bring the church back to the Bible.” Faithful Anglicans who have protested the unbiblical, heretical, and arrogant actions of the American and Canadian churches have been told that their protests are themselves a sin against the unity of the church. This flies in the face of the fact that the Lambeth Commission would not have been created, and the Windsor Report would never have been written, had these conservative Anglicans not broken the denominational glass and pulled the fire alarm.

Journalist Jeremy Paxman once wrote of asking the Bishop of Oxford what beliefs were necessary in order for an individual to be a member of the Anglican Church. As Paxman recalled, “A look of slight bafflement crossed his face. ‘An intriguing question,’ he answered, as if it had not occurred to him before.” The bishop eventually said, “Well, it rather depends.” He continued, “It depends on which church you go to. An evangelical church will say you need to be sincerely converted. A traditional Anglo-Catholic church will teach you a Christian orthodoxy virtually indistinguishable from Roman Catholic teaching.” As Paxman commented, “It doesn’t add up to a very coherent set of rules of belief, does it?” The bishop countered, “The Church of England doesn’t believe in laying down rules. It prefers to give people space and freedom. It’s enough to make the effort to attend and take communion. That shows you believe.” As Paxman concluded, “This is the sort of wooliness that drives critics of the Church of England to distraction.”

The Windsor Report is further evidence of such “wooliness.” The report’s “on the one hand . . . on the other hand” argument is an abdication of responsibility. Torn apart by divisions over an issue as volatile as homosexuality, the Lambeth Commission has released a report more concerned with polity than principle, and more concerned with hurt feelings than heretical teachings.

The Reverend Martin Reynolds, spokesman for Britain’s Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, told BBC News, “Whilst we are very saddened by the suggestion that bishops who have been supportive of Gene [Robinson] and supportive of same-sex blessings should withdraw from the councils of the Church, we are happy with the general tone of the report which is aimed at healing and reconciliation.” Reverend Reynolds and other homosexual advocates have every reason to be happy with this report, for its adoption will mean the eventual triumph of the pro-homosexual argument within the church.

Furthermore, the liberal faction shows no sign of retreat. The Most Reverend Frank T. Griswold, Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church [USA], released a statement just after the Windsor Report’s publication. “My first reading shows the Report as having in mind the containment of differences in the service of reconciliation,” Bishop Griswold noted. Nevertheless, he insisted that the church must “go beyond containment” and actually deal with the issues. More importantly, even as he expressed some level of awkward “regret” for the pain caused in some Anglican circles by the consecration of an openly-gay bishop, he offered no apology and gave no ground: “Given the emphasis of the Report on difficulties presented by our differing understandings of homosexuality, as Presiding Bishop I am obliged to affirm the presence and positive contribution of gay and lesbian persons to every aspect of the life of our church and in all orders of ministry.” In other words, those opposed to the election of openly-gay bishops and the recognition of same-sex unions were told to take a hike.

Retired Bishop John Shelby Spong, the Episcopal Church [USA]’s poster child for post-biblical heterodoxy, told The Times of London, “The truth of rising consciousness can never be determined by majority votes.” In other words, nothing is going to hold homosexual advocates back from pressing their cause and winning their battle.

Biblical orthodoxy takes a significant hit on the chin in the Windsor Report, and conservative Anglicans and faithful Episcopalians have every reason to be disappointed. The Lambeth Commission has let them down, and with them, the whole Church.

Jeremy Paxman once described the Church of England as “a church built on the conviction that anything can be settled over a cup of tea.” Not so this time. The Windsor Report now becomes part of the problem, rather than part of a solution.

