

“Come Out and Stay Out!” Hermeneutics, Homosexuality, and Schism in Anglicanism

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This article seeks to analyze the violence of homophobia and the overlapping violence of schism—both of which continue to threaten the worldwide Anglican Communion—in light of the reading practices which have characterized Anglicanism over the centuries. Fifty years after the release of the Church of England’s Wolfenden Report (1957), the ecclesiological crisis currently besetting the Anglican Communion is essentially a hermeneutical one. While the seeds of a lasting solution may lie within Anglicanism’s own formularies and doctrine of Scripture, it seems highly likely that further violence will be perpetrated in the short term on both the homosexual community and the delicate bonds of fellowship. Some biblical and other sources of this risk are identified and critically examined, together with some distinctively Anglican strategies for advancing the debate more peaceably.

The Current Crisis in the Anglican Communion

On February 26, 2005, a somewhat bemused impression of Anglican church politics penned by Melbourne newspaper cartoonist, Ron Tanberg, was published.¹ The small black and white line drawing depicted two male clergy leaving the west doors and gate of a church, hand in hand, while another, larger group of angry-looking male clerics shout in unison: “Come out and stay out!”

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¹ “Insight,” *The Age*, February 26, 2005, 5.

The cartoon was in response to the previous day's announcement from a meeting of Anglican Primates that the Provinces of Canada and the United States had been asked to voluntarily withdraw from the Anglican Consultative Council until 2008, on account of their liberal stance on homosexuality. The official statement read: "Many Primates have been deeply alarmed that the standard of Christian teaching on matters of human sexuality . . . has been seriously undermined by . . . recent developments in North America."²

Despite the diplomatic feat of Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams in securing more time to resolve the conflict, several commentators and church leaders saw the move as a first step towards schism within Anglicanism—a Communion already suffering the effects of what James Alison calls "the schism of discourse."³ The Church of England subsequently came under heavy criticism for its bishops' decision to allow gay clergy to register same-gender relationships under the government's forthcoming civil partnerships legislation.⁴ Some of its members unsuccessfully lobbied the Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, to prevent the Bishop of New Hampshire, Gene Robinson, from entering a church during his November 2005 visit to the UK.⁵ Around the same time, the Province of Nigeria, home to one quarter of the world's Anglicans, amended its constitution to remove any reference to the See of Canterbury—an association historically integral to Anglican identity.⁶

For Primates of a group of twenty provinces known as the Global South, "the standard of Christian teaching on matters of human sexuality" rests squarely on what is taken to be "the clear teaching of the Bible."⁷ The biblical text thus becomes an instrument by which the

² Barney Swartz, "Anglicans ask Canada, US to leave," *The Age*, February 26, 2005; "Insight," 5.

³ James Alison, "Human Sexuality . . . or Ecclesial Discourse?" (paper presented for the Sarum Consultation on Human Sexuality and the Churches, February 9-10, 2004).

⁴ Electronic newsletter from St. Matthew's, Westminster, London, November 1, 2005 (pressmail@stmw.org), n.p.

⁵ Stephen Bates, "Gay US bishop in 'candid' talks with Archbishop of Canterbury," *The Guardian*, November 4, 2005, reproduced in electronic newsletter from St. Matthew's, Westminster, London, November 4, 2005, n.p.

⁶ Electronic newsletter from St. Matthew's, Westminster, London, November 1, 2005, n.p.

⁷ See Ian K. Duffield, "The Clear Teaching of the Bible? A Contribution to the Debate about Homosexuality and the Church of England," *The Expository Times* 115.4 (2004): 109-115.

precious but fragile bonds of communion threaten to be severed. Gay and lesbian Anglicans, and those who would bless their unions and recognize their ministries, seem forced to choose between closeted communion and alienated integrity. As with all choiceless choices, such an alternative is inherently violent, and biblical hermeneutics is complicit in that violence. What a text forges in its reception is part of its influence, or creative power—what Gadamer has called the effective historical consciousness of a text within its tradition.⁸

In discussing the sorts of shared plausibility structures that allow us to find some arguments from Scripture more persuasive than others, Charles Cosgrove observes that “making these implicit plausibility structures explicit as hermeneutical rules helps us to understand the nature of moral argument from the Bible, to examine its bases, and to test for consistency in our tacit hermeneutical theories and argumentative practice.”⁹ Doing so may not only reduce the violence meted out from all sides by the way Scripture is deployed in this debate. It might also assist Anglicans who do take a more liberal view to reclaim biblical authority for their position. In Australia, at least, it has been too readily assumed—and conceded—that an inclusive stance can only be taken at the expense of being, or being seen to be, unfaithful to Scripture—another choiceless choice. James Alison notes a similar phenomenon following episcopal appointments on both sides of the Atlantic: “the impression that ‘the Bible is quite clear . . .’ has passed largely unchallenged in the media, which has found it easiest to present the argument as being between conservative people who take the Bible seriously (and are thus against gay people) and liberal people who don’t (and thus aren’t against gay people).”¹⁰

This issue is by no means a new one for Anglicans. The Church of England’s Wolfenden Report of 1957 recommended “that homosexual behavior between consenting adults in private be no longer a criminal offense.”¹¹ The report is credited with having a direct influence

⁸ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. D. E. Linge (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1976), 300-307.

⁹ Charles Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate: Five Hermeneutical Rules* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 46.

¹⁰ James Alison, “‘But the Bible says . . .?’ A Catholic Reading of Romans 1” (address given at Mount Saint Agnes Theological Center for Women, Baltimore, Md., January 12, 2004).

¹¹ The Wolfenden Report (1957) §355 (a) I, in *The Churches Speak on Homosexuality: Official Statements from Religious Bodies and Ecumenical Organizations*, ed. J. Gordon Melton (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research, 1991), 64; compare §§17, 18.

on the decriminalization of homosexuality in Great Britain and in forcing a reconsideration of the issue by other Christian churches.¹² Yet, despite its progressive line, that report still speaks of homosexuality in terms of an illness with its own etiology, and of psychiatric and hormonal treatment. It trivializes same-sex sexuality as something that can be controlled, like coughing. And it lapses into implicitly connecting homosexuality with pedophilia and promiscuity.¹³ Nigerian Primate Peter Akinola went further after the 2005 Primate's meeting, saying, "Homosexuality or lesbianism or bestiality is to us a form of slavery, and redemption from it is readily available through repentance and faith in the saving grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ."¹⁴

Other key texts generated within the global Communion since the Wolfenden Report rehearse a range of forms of violence suffered by gays and lesbians. These reports note "queer bashing" and overt hostility towards homosexual clergy. They report homophobia associated with HIV/AIDS, and social hostility resulting in more transient relationships.¹⁵ Gays and lesbians deny or repress their homosexual identity, and find "coming out" traumatic. Clergy are forced to resign, and faith communities lose their pastoral and doctrinal or intellectual integrity.¹⁶ Lay and ordained ministries by (and in some cases to) homosexual persons are repudiated, and gays and lesbians are seen as "second-class citizens in the Church of their baptism, fit to receive all other sacraments but the grace of Holy Orders."¹⁷ Gays and lesbians are called to abstain from sexual relations, although this "sacrifice [is] not asked of heterosexual persons generally . . . [to] abandon all hope of finding human fulfillment, under God, in a sexual and supportive relationship."¹⁸ To demand abstinence of gays and lesbians only "makes a mockery of the vow and commitment which the Church has made to them in that sacrament of baptism to 'do all in (its) power to support these persons in their life in Christ.'" ¹⁹ Or gays and lesbians may be

¹² Melton, *Churches Speak*, 65.

¹³ Wolfenden Report, §§22, 25, 32, 34, and elsewhere.

¹⁴ Peter Akinola, "Why I Object to Homosexuality," *Church Times*, August 2005, 4.

¹⁵ "Homosexuality and a Pastoral Church" (Church of England, 1988), §§25, 26, 34.

¹⁶ "Homosexuality and a Pastoral Church," §§30, 31, 36, 42.

¹⁷ "Statement on Homosexuality" (ECUSA, 1979).

¹⁸ "Statement on Homosexuality." Compare "Resolution 1.10 on Human Sexuality" (Lambeth Conference 1998), in Michael Doe, *Seeking the Truth in Love: The Church and Homosexuality* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2000), 122-123.

¹⁹ "Statement on Homosexuality."

called to repent with respect to sexual orientation.²⁰ These studies also report high suicide levels among younger gays and lesbians.²¹ Although the much-anticipated Windsor Report of 2004 insists that “any demonizing of homosexual persons, or their ill-treatment, is totally against Christian charity and basic principles of pastoral care,”²² Rowan Williams cautioned the Church of England’s General Synod of 2005 that “if the acceptance of [its recommendations] were to be simply a mask, a stalking horse, for prejudice or bigotry, for collusion in violence, then . . . the report would have failed, and worse . . . would have made us less than the body of Christ.”²³

With these formal ecclesial acknowledgements from the last fifty years as background to the current crisis, it is important to identify some of the biblical seeds of this hostility, before considering how more fully embracing a characteristically Anglican understanding of Scripture and the hermeneutical task may help this Communion avoid the twofold violence of schism and homophobia.

Biblical Sources of Homophobic Violence in Christianity

Michael Vasey states bluntly that “for countless gay and lesbian people the Bible has brought death, not life. Many speak of the Bible as a ‘six-gun,’ a pistol loaded with six texts that are used as bullets—Bible bullets—to kill lesbian and gay people in a contest about whether they can be full members of the community of faith.”²⁴ While not addressing any of these texts directly, Regina Schwartz writes of a virulent biblical abhorrence to incest, which resonates with what she describes as the general biblical hysteria about, and its explicit horror of, homosexuality. Drawing on Freud’s theory of desire, she relates the

²⁰ “Resolution on Homosexuality” (Church of England, 1987), §3. Compare “Statement on Homosexuality” (ECUSA 1988), §3.

²¹ “Resolution on Suicide Among Gay and Lesbian Youth” (ECUSA, 1988). According to Michael Doe, as many as one third of all youth suicides in the United States are committed by homosexual persons, and more gay and lesbian young people in New Zealand died at their own hands than of HIV/AIDS at the height of the epidemic in that country. See *Seeking the Truth in Love*, 81.

²² The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *The Windsor Report*, (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2004), §146.

²³ Cited by Andrew Linzey, “Introduction: Mistakes of the Creator,” in *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism: Responses to the Windsor Report*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Richard Kirker (Winchester/New York: O Books, 2005), xxvi.

²⁴ Cited by Doe, *Seeking the Truth in Love*, 85.

incest taboo to a fear of identification and displacement. In the process of identification—never fully successful, as the biblical narratives of Noah and Ham and of the Tower of Babel suggest²⁵—both love and fury are projected towards the object. Mimetic desire, as René Girard has also shown,²⁶ thus presents a threat and, as such, is often a precursor to violence. In each of these narratives, for example, the response is to quash the perceived threat: Noah curses Ham, re-enforcing the father-son hierarchy; and God introduces radical otherness at Babel, paralyzing the drive to imitate and displace the divine.²⁷ The recurrent theme of sibling rivalry in the Hebrew Bible has the similar effect of setting brothers against one another while preserving the authority of the f/Father. Conversely, the intimacy between David and Jonathan is a key factor in David's accession to the throne over Jonathan's father, Saul. Schwartz argues that these and other texts bear witness to "a palpable fear that when men love one another, they will overthrow their fathers. And so the biblical norm of paternal dominance deliberately promotes rivalry, not love, among brothers."²⁸

In his reading of Jesus' encounter with the local authorities in John 8:31-59, James Alison attributes to John a theological anthropology which seeks to recast the human relationship to divine paternity in terms of participation in the fraternity of the Son, thus defusing sibling rivalry.²⁹ Jesus' interlocutors in this episode illustrate Schwartz's thesis. An undifferentiated claim to the paternity of God and of Abraham here results in fratricidal cultural imperatives. The interlocutors exclude Jesus as well as the man born blind (in the passage which follows) by making "completely and sacredly watertight their [own] cultural and group belonging."³⁰ As Alison explains,

Jesus is saying that there are two paternities: that of his Father which is accessible in and through the imitative creation of an

²⁵ Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain, The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 107.

²⁶ See René Girard, "Mimesis and Violence," in *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 9-19; compare René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, excerpted in Williams, *Girard Reader*, 71-93.

²⁷ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 107-109.

²⁸ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 110.

²⁹ James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2001), 56-85.

³⁰ Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 67.

inclusive fraternity . . . or . . . the cultural reality proper to all humanity . . . [with] its origin in a fratricidal murder, that of Abel by Cain . . . The structure of our desire, which precedes our consciousness, is murderous. That desire ensures that our cultural constructs, our language and our knowledge are radically inflected by the lie which fails to recognize this, fails to see God in humans who are “other,” or ourselves in our victims, which is to say the same thing.³¹

In John’s gospel, then, Jesus embodies a divine project—a project continuous with that evident in some of the theophanic narratives of Abraham and the patriarchs—of overcoming fratricidal fraternity. Accordingly, any cultural fraternal belonging is idolatrous if it is contingent upon paternal images of God that legitimate—indeed necessitate—fratricide. For, as Girard reminds us, this sort of belonging demands the “sacred violence” of sacrifice.³²

Genesis 44 provides another example of this project. Testing his brothers to see whether they will sacrifice Benjamin, Joseph elicits from Judah an acknowledgement of his earlier fratricide, along with Judah’s refusal to reconstruct his identity by this means. In the process, Alison observes, Joseph and Judah cease to be related to Jacob as rivals, “for how can I go back to my father,” asks Judah, “if the boy is not with me?” (Gen. 44:34, NRSV). With this in view, Alison re-describes Freud’s account of oedipal desire, more recognizably perhaps for readers of the biblical text, in terms of intergenerational sibling rivalry. The implication is that adult children cannot blame their parents for the violence the children feel driven to perpetrate against one another in order to fix the boundaries of their belonging. Resisting the temptation to blame, in turn, inhibits the cycle of violence. Girard again: “[Humans] can dispose of their violence more efficiently if they regard the process not as emanating from within themselves, but as a necessity imposed from without, a divine decree whose least infraction calls down terrible punishment.”³³

But, as always, the biblical texts are sites of theological and anthropological contest. Schwartz contends that homosexual desire in

³¹ Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 64-65.

³² Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 74. See also Girard, “Mimesis and Violence,” 12-13; Williams, *Girard Reader*, 69-70; and Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 82-83.

³³ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 83.

the biblical worldview retains “all the attendant horrors of guilt, ambivalence, and projected fears of punishment” associated with oedipal desire, which, despite—or quite possibly because of—protests to the contrary, “seeps from the pages of the Bible.” In her view, only the need to repress such desire—especially in its intergenerational form with the associated threat of displacement—explains “the ferocity of biblical injunctions against homosexuality.”³⁴

An Anglican Understanding of Scripture

There are three distinctive, though not unique, features of an Anglican approach to Scripture that combine to offer the means of stewarding this complex biblical inheritance towards less violent ends.

A relative view of the authority of Scripture

In *Lux Mundi*, Charles Gore states plainly that “the Church has in Holy Scripture the highest expression of the mind of Christ.”³⁵ While acknowledging their intrinsic authority, Gore cautions that the biblical texts need the Church no less if their genius is to shine, adding that the Scriptures have “suffered greatly from being isolated” as a source of authority for belief.³⁶ Centuries earlier, faced with the Anabaptist view of Scripture as all- and self-sufficient, Anglican luminary Richard Hooker countered, “for mine own part, I dare not so lightly esteem of the Church.”³⁷ As he explained it, “Scripture could not teach us the things that are of God, unless we did credit men who have taught us that the words of Scripture do signify those things.”³⁸

Likewise, Articles of Religion 6 and 7, in setting out the “adequacy” of Scripture, implicitly acknowledge the Church’s hermeneutical task, which has been clearly reaffirmed in the 2004 Windsor Report §59. As a primary source of authority for belief, therefore, Scripture is never the only reliable authority for Anglicans. This principle is at the heart of Hooker’s classic triangulation of Scripture,

³⁴ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 111, 113.

³⁵ Charles Gore, “The Holy Spirit and Inspiration,” in *Lux Mundi: A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation*, ed. Charles Gore, 8th ed. (London: John Murray, 1890), 326.

³⁶ Gore, “The Holy Spirit and Inspiration,” 337.

³⁷ Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, II.iv.4, ed. John Keble, 3 vols. (Oxford: The University Press, 1841).

³⁸ *Laws*, II.vii.3.

reason, and tradition as sources to be appealed to in concert, as they are in the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1886/1888, which pegged out the Scriptures, creeds, sacraments, and the historic episcopate as the framework over which the “sacred deposit” of Christian faith can be stretched.³⁹ In both of these foundational Anglican schemas, Scripture’s authority is relative rather than absolute, not so much a blueprint for action as a way of shaping in the church what Hooker described as a Scripture-informed reason.⁴⁰

An incarnational view of Scripture

In distinguishing between the binding moral force of the commandments and the non-binding civic and ritual aspects of the Mosaic law, Article 7 implies that what constitutes a faithful reception of Scripture for Anglicans is not fixed by original or originating reading contexts.⁴¹ Rather, as Hooker insisted, careful attention to the provenance of biblical texts is part and parcel of their interpretation: “The several books of Scripture having had each some several occasion and particular purpose which caused them to be written, the contents thereof are according the exigence of that special end whereunto they are intended.”⁴²

This squares well with Anglicanism’s incarnational spirituality, as Anthony Harvey, writing for the Church of England’s Doctrine Commission, explains:

If Scripture is “inspired,” it is inspired by the same God who accepted the constraints of the incarnation. It is not invested with an other-worldly, totally self-authenticating power; as with the incarnation itself, its uniqueness and authority can be glimpsed only through the limitations imposed upon it, as upon any other book, by the circumstances of composition, editing, copying and circulation.⁴³

³⁹ See J. Robert Wright, ed., *Quadrilateral at One Hundred: Essays on the Centenary of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral 1886/88-1986/88* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Forward Movement Publications, 1988), vii-ix.

⁴⁰ *Laws* II.i.3; compare II.v.1, II.viii.5.

⁴¹ Bruce Kaye, *A Church Without Walls: Being Anglican in Australia* (Melbourne: HarperCollins/Dove, 1995), 70.

⁴² *Laws* I.xiv.3.

⁴³ Anthony Harvey, “Attending to Scripture,” in the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, *Believing in the Church: The Corporate Nature of Faith* (London: SPCK, 1981), 30.

As written word, Scripture is no less subject to the scandal of particularity than the Incarnate Word.⁴⁴

A canonical approach to the reading of Scripture

Article 20 urges Anglicans to apply a canonical approach to the reading of Scripture; that is, one in which its various parts are understood in light of the whole, such that Scripture is read coherently.⁴⁵ In addition to the interpretive significance of a given text's full literary context, in the first instance a canonical approach (as Gore's views have already intimated) will also be attentive to the effective-historical consciousness adhering to any tradition—each of which is a "canon."

There is an obvious ecclesial importance to this: the coherence between readings of Scripture and other aspects of a church's common life and worship. In a Communion which lives by the adage *lex orandi lex credendi*, an Anglican reading of Scripture within the canon of the Church's tradition (in both its Anglican and ecumenical expressions) is thus always to some extent a "ruled reading,"⁴⁶ a reading within the framework of the church's prayer and its beliefs. Gore understood the nature of revelation as both historically grounded in paradigmatic events and continuously recapitulated in present experience. He recognized that "belief in the Holy Scriptures as inspired requires . . . belief in the general action of the Holy Spirit upon the Christian society and the individual soul."⁴⁷ In the same way, William Countryman encourages Anglican readers of Scripture to draw on those "contemporary cultural and philosophical canons of how we 'make sense' to one another."⁴⁸

This, too, is a long-established Anglican principle. Assuming the classic taxonomy of God as author of both the "book of Nature" and

⁴⁴ Peta Sherlock, "Between the Lines: The Bible for Our Time" (paper presented to a meeting of the Australian Church Union, Melbourne, August 31, 2005).

⁴⁵ For a good contemporary example of this with respect to the question at hand, see Carolyn J. Sharpe, "Beyond Proof-texting," in Linzey and Kirker, *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism*, 30-48, and especially 37-47.

⁴⁶ See James G. Dunn, "What Makes a Good Exposition?" *The Expository Times* 114.5 (2003): 147-157, and especially 150.

⁴⁷ Gore, "The Holy Spirit and Inspiration," 338.

⁴⁸ William Countryman, "Reading Scripture—and Rereading It," *Anglican Theological Review* 86, no. 4 (2004): 574.

the “book of Scripture,” Hooker insisted that each of these texts be read such that they are mutually illuminating, and never incompatible, for “both jointly and not severally either of them be so complete.”⁴⁹ And at the turn of the twentieth century, Brooke Foss Westcott championed a model of progressive revelation in relation to the biblical text, whereby “the Church welcomes the experience of the past not as exhaustive or finally authoritative, but as educative.”⁵⁰ Reginald Fuller, too, sees Scripture’s normativity for Anglicans as illustrative rather than prescriptive.⁵¹ Countryman arrives at the same position on the basis of Paul’s re-reading of Scripture in relation to the Gentile question in Romans 15, and the Markan Christ’s re-reading with respect to divorce.⁵² Jesus’ caveat in Mark 10—“because of your hardness of heart”—suggests to Countryman that “just because something is in Scripture, it does not necessarily follow that it is the will of God. Some texts . . . express nothing more than the stupidity, the sullenness, the bigotry . . . of the people who received [and receive] them.” It is never enough, therefore, to know what Scripture says, Countryman insists; we “must also examine ourselves, the hearers and readers.”⁵³ This is especially important for a “church in society” tradition,⁵⁴ such as Anglicanism, where “the adequacy of the identities a canon creates and sustains is tested in the unprotected space of contemporary public discourse.”⁵⁵

Two Essential Ways Forward

To return, then, to the choiceless choices with which we began, how can Anglicans move beyond the inherently violent alternative of giving up the “biblical high ground” or giving up on an inclusive communion? Two aspects of the preceding analysis may be helpful in this regard.

⁴⁹ *Laws* I.xiv.5; compare II.iv.5-7.

⁵⁰ Cited by William L. Sachs, *The Transformation of Anglicanism: From State Church to Global Communion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 150.

⁵¹ Reginald H. Fuller, “Scripture,” in *The Study of Anglicanism*, ed. Stephen Sykes and John Booty (London: SPCK, 1988), 84.

⁵² Countryman, “Reading Scripture,” 578-582.

⁵³ Countryman, “Reading Scripture,” 581-582.

⁵⁴ Kaye, *A Church Without Walls*, 7.

⁵⁵ Delwin Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994), 90.

Reading (with Scripture) against Scripture

Typical Anglican reading strategies ought not to be prone to “Biblio-idolatry,” the worship of the book.⁵⁶ Any hermeneutic that locates truth *in* the Bible ends up, as Hooker put it, attributing to Scripture more than it can have.⁵⁷ Marcus Borg, in keeping with Hooker’s sense of a Scripture-informed reason, has described the whole of Scripture as a giant metaphor, pointing out that “the point is not to ‘believe’ in a metaphor—but to ‘see’ with it. Thus the point is not to believe in the Bible—but to see our lives with God through it.”⁵⁸ If, therefore, with the help of theories of violence such as those adumbrated earlier, the origins of particular biblical trajectories can be more critically examined, then, in the light of other canonical imperatives, some of those trajectories can also be resisted.

Peter Jensen, current Archbishop of Sydney and Primate at the time of the February 2005 meeting, has appealed to the ecumenical and historical consensus that Scripture forbids homosexual practice. Somewhat counter-productively, he cites the following comment from Diarmaid MacCulloch as scholarly support for his position: “it is difficult to see the Bible as expressing anything else but disapproval of homosexual activity, let alone having any conception of homosexual identity. The only alternatives are to try and cleave to patterns of life and assumptions set out in the Bible, or to say in this, as in much else, the Bible is simply wrong.”⁵⁹ Within an Anglican doctrine of Scripture, the second pole of MacCulloch’s alternative here seems entirely unremarkable. Anglicans can resist the Bible’s “plain teaching” in this matter, as we patently already do with regard to much else. We need only the courage of our traditioned convictions about Scripture—those hermeneutical plausibility structures we share—to say “with” Scripture that at times we must read “against” Scripture. This is simply to acknowledge, as Countryman does, that certain of its words are

⁵⁶ Timothy Gaden, “Inwardly Digesting: Reading Bible as Sacrament” (paper delivered to a meeting of the Australian Church Union, Melbourne, August 31, 2005).

⁵⁷ *Laws*, II.viii.7.

⁵⁸ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperCollins, 2000), 57.

⁵⁹ Peter Jensen, “A Response to Scott Cowdell,” in *Lost in Translation? Anglicans, Controversy and the Bible*, ed. Scott Cowdell and Muriel Porter, (Melbourne: Des-books, 2004), 132.

“embedded in cultural presuppositions that are no longer intelligible, or even morally acceptable in our own time.”⁶⁰ Far from playing into the hands of those who would claim biblical authority for one position only on this question, this is at once a hermeneutic of suspicion and of retrieval, calling for bolder, more comprehensive readings of Scripture and tradition to challenge any and all cultural and ecclesial uses of biblical texts as stalking horses to collude in violence.⁶¹ The recent statement by the Episcopal Church, *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, captures this tension ably: “we affirm the wisdom and holiness of the Scriptures, and assume, most gratefully, that we are to be instructed by them. Yet not every biblical norm is directly relevant to every situation in our own time. Discernment is required.”⁶²

Indeed, the teaching authority of the Vatican instructs no less for Roman Catholics. Guidelines for reading the Bible put out by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1993 have the following to say about the hermeneutical strategy of “actualization,” the practice of reading ancient texts as referring in a straightforward way to modern realities: “Clearly to be rejected also is every attempt at actualization set in a direction contrary to evangelical justice and charity, such as . . . the use of the Bible to justify racial segregation, anti-Semitism or sexism.”⁶³ On the basis of this official teaching, Alison argues with respect to Romans 1 that “given the possibility of an ancient limited meaning, or a more expansive one potentially harmful to a modern category of people, a Catholic reading should prefer the ancient limited meaning.”⁶⁴

Reading ecclesially

The second aspect of the preceding analysis has to do with the unavoidable reality that to read Scripture as an Anglican is to read ecclesially. This means that an Anglican hermeneutic will ultimately and more properly be concerned with the ministry of reconciliation than

⁶⁰ William Countryman, “Politics, Polity and the Bible as Hostage,” in Linzey and Kirker, *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism*, 11.

⁶¹ See Lisa Isherwood, “Scripture for Liberation,” in Linzey and Kirker, *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism*, 59.

⁶² *To Set Our Hope on Christ: a response to the invitation of Windsor Report* (New York: Office of Communication, Episcopal Church Center, 2005), §2.18.

⁶³ “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993), IV.3.

⁶⁴ Alison, “‘But the Bible says . . .?’” 4; see also *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, §2.21.b.

with delivering the “correct” answer on any question of morality or doctrine.⁶⁵ Alison is realistic about the challenge this represents:

the really hard work in Christian theological discourse lies in the ecclesiological sphere: creating Church with those who we don’t like. Or to put it another way: as a Catholic, the only way I could conceivably be right in what is recognizably a new theological and moral position is if I show that being right is nothing to do with me, and how it includes an account of how we have all been wrong together in which I too am on the side of those with whom I disagree as someone undergoing a change of heart along with them.⁶⁶

The Anglican Communion must ask what form of discourse, including hermeneutical discourse, will provide room for us all to have been wrong together, will allow ourselves and others, where necessary, to “lose face” grace-fully? Rowan Williams touched on this also in his address to the third Global South Encounter at Ain al Sukhna, Egypt, in 2005:

one of the hardest tasks we have when discipline is exercised, when discriminations are drawn, is how we remain in loving and prayerful fellowship with those who are our fellow sinners, not wholly strangers to us. Who accompanies? Who, like Makarios [the fourth-century Egyptian desert father] rises to go out with the expelled sinner? To sit and to pray and love? That, too, is a challenge of unity.⁶⁷

Here the idea of a ruled reading of Scripture bears directly on the nexus of the Bible and violence. Stanley Hauerwas has argued that the church’s essential vocation or virtue, one inherent to its very nature, is peacemaking, which is usually anything but a peaceful activity. The essential ecclesial virtue of peacemaking, insists Hauerwas, “is an act of imagination built on long habits of the resolution of differences . . . a practice of confronting wrongs so that violence might be avoided. In

⁶⁵ See Alison, “Human Sexuality,” 9; and Windsor Report, §§62, 71. Compare “Homosexuality and a Pastoral Church,” §46.

⁶⁶ Alison, “Human Sexuality,” 9.

⁶⁷ Electronic newsletter from St. Matthew’s, Westminster, London, November 1, 2005, n.p.

truth, we must say that the church has too often failed the world by its failure to witness in [its] own life the kind of conflict necessary to be a community of peace.”⁶⁸ As a *lex orandi lex credendi* tradition, Anglicanism’s greatest resource for responding to this hermeneutical vocation to read ecclesially, and thus for peace, is the Eucharist, where Scripture is primarily and collectively read and heard, and by which it is interpreted. Indeed, the Book of Common Prayer Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent urges Anglicans to receive the Scriptures as a “literary Eucharist,”⁶⁹ to be read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested. For Anglicans, within the wider canon of their Communion’s life and theology, to receive Scripture in this way means regarding it no more as a magic book than to see consecrated bread and wine as having magical qualities.⁷⁰ The Bible, so understood, is not directly equivalent to God’s word—a sort of divine metonymy. It is, rather, as former Archbishop of Canterbury, Donald Coggan described it, the Word of God sacramentally.⁷¹

Conclusion

The Windsor Report invited the Episcopal Church in the US to explain “from within the sources of authority that we as Anglicans have received in scripture, the apostolic tradition and reasoned reflection, how a person living in a same gender union may be considered eligible to lead the flock of Christ” (§135). Among many other things, the Episcopal Church’s careful response lists a number of issues—stewardship of creation, usury, slavery, just war, abortion, capital punishment, contraception, marriage and divorce, evolution, labor laws, and property rights among them—with respect to which “the Church’s appropriation of Scripture has been complex and in many cases . . . at odds with the most obvious sense of the biblical text.”⁷²

⁶⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living In Between* (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth, 1988), 95.

⁶⁹ Gaden, “Inwardly Digesting.”

⁷⁰ Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), 40-41.

⁷¹ Donald Coggan, *Preaching: The Sacrament of the Word* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1988).

⁷² *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, §2.12. Of the other matters covered, from the biblical perspective the sustained and analogical reading of the account of the inclusion of the Gentiles in Acts 10-15 is perhaps most significant (§§2.10-12).

Like “the threat of schism over the role of women in [ordained leadership of] the Church,” the current controversy represents a moment of “severe theological and institutional crisis” for the Episcopal Church, and indeed for the wider Anglican Communion.⁷³ Following the Episcopal Church’s reconciliation of northern and southern church structures after the Civil War, the House of Bishops refrained from addressing the question of race relations in pastoral letters for the rest of the nineteenth century, resulting in a mass exodus of African Americans and prompting one historian to describe the General Convention of 1865 as “abhorring ecclesiastical schism more than the suffering of people held in bondage.”⁷⁴ Today the Episcopal Church seems prophetically clear about which violence is greater, and the more greatly to be abhorred.

The “lesser” violence of schism, however, is not to be suffered lightly, for preserving ecclesial communion as the proper context for hermeneutical work is integral to an Anglican understanding of reception of the living Word through the written word, traditioned experience, and reasoned reflection. “In the process of discernment and reception,” urges the 1997 Virginia Report, “relationships need to be maintained, for only in fellowship is there opportunity for correcting one-sidedness or ignorance.”⁷⁵ For good *and* ill, the Anglican Communion enjoys no structure equivalent to the Pontifical Biblical Commission in the Roman tradition. For good, possibly, a broad church with soft edges has flourished seasonally and regionally, creating a healthy dialectical environment for theological discourse. For ill, certainly, implicitness has for too long governed its hermeneutical theories and argumentative practice. Under such conditions it is too easy for ecclesial identity-formation to become culturally fraternal, and thus biblically fratricidal and idolatrous.

As the Anglican Church narrows and hardens—to the point of being brittle—around positions on what the Bible says (or doesn’t say) in relation to this issue, greater accountability is needed to what its own tradition teaches the Bible *is*, and, in the unprotected space of

⁷³ *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, §3.5.

⁷⁴ Gardiner H. Shattuck, cited in *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, §3.9.

⁷⁵ “The Report of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission,” (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 1997), §5.24, cited in *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, §3.9.

public discourse, to those wider canons of sense-making by which our structurally murderous desire is held in reasonable check. Clearly the resources exist within the formularies and plausibility structures of Anglicanism to make such things explicit. By attending to these more intentionally, perhaps we can learn to be more fully ourselves: to “come out” as Anglicans—gay, lesbian, and straight—precisely by “staying in” communion.

