

The Vocation of Holiness in Today's World: Anglican Interpretation of Scripture by Professor David F. Ford

Background: This is the text of an address by Professor Ford given at the Fourth meeting of the Primates of the Anglican Communion held in Porto, Portugal in March 2000. It is reproduced here with minimal editing.

Introduction

What I have been asked to do in this session is to introduce a discussion of the interpretation of Scripture, what is to be learnt about this from our Anglican tradition (which I take as being rooted in the Early Church and to embrace the Reformation and more recent history, including the 1998 Lambeth Conference) and how that is related to the vocation to holiness today. How is the Anglican Communion to be a lively tradition faithful to that vocation and inspired deeply by Scripture?

I am taking for granted your familiarity with the two documents: the Montreal Report on Scripture from the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order and the 1958 Lambeth Conference statement and resolutions on Scripture. The latter is especially important for our deliberations. I see it as a classic statement on biblical interpretation.

- It faces key issues which continually recur and often cause controversy between churches and between traditions within Anglicanism.
- It gives a measured affirmation of the value of modern biblical scholarship.
- It gives a clear account of the 'drama of the Bible' as the main perspective within which specific texts are to be interpreted.
- It distils some of the wisdom of the Anglican Church about the relation of Scripture to salvation, doctrine, liturgy, and Christian living.
- It focuses all that in twelve resolutions which are as relevant today as they were then.

Ephesians 4-6

I want to begin from Ephesians again, especially Chaps 4-6.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness (gentleness), with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (4.1-3)

"Leading a life worthy of our calling" is another way of talking about a vocation of holiness. These are pivotal, hinge verses in the epistle. The 'therefore' looks back to the first three chapters. Holiness is rooted in all that we looked at yesterday -

in the fulness of God,
in the whole ecology of life in Christ who is gathering all things together, in the death of Christ and the unity in new humanity that has created,
and in being built into a holy temple in the Lord.

These verses are also the headline for chapters 4-6. In these chapters some key aspects of what this "life worthy of our calling" is like. Their basic concern can be seen as holiness, as summed up in 4.23-24:

... [B]e renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

It is striking that immediately after that verse comes:

Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbour, for we are members one of another. (4.25)

Talk of holiness is linked as closely as possible to how we speak to each other. A few verses earlier came the same emphasis on how utterly essential this is to the church. We are no longer to be

carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness and deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. (4.14-15)

There is a pervasive concern for the quality of communication, in content and in manner.

This is also rooted in the first three chapters. The Ephesians "heard the word of truth, the good news" of their salvation (1.13). They are to "live to the praise of [God's] glory"; there is thanks and intercession, boldness in free speech (*parresia*) before God, and that extraordinary example of boldness in the prayer at the end of chapter 3.

Looking through the last three chapters the theme of holy communication leaps out in other places too. The gifts in the church that are mentioned have a great deal to do with communication - apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers. It is vital how the Ephesians were educated in Christ, "learned Christ" (4.20). Sins of speech (evil talk, silly talk, empty words) are prominent among other sins, and the summary statement at the end of Chapter 4 stresses the mode and spirit of all behaviour:

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (4.31-2)

Another few hinge verses come in 5.18-20. They come between the general teaching about behaviour, with its ethic of communication in Christ, and the specific instructions to husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves. The practice of singing and thanksgiving is to pervade both. Singing and thanksgiving are at the heart of transformed communication in the church:

... be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father. (5.18-20)

Then in the final chapter the armour of God which enables the community to stand firm is described in terms shot through with communicational concepts: shared truth, the good news, the word of God. The practice that energises them all is joint prayer:

Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. (6.18)

And the final plea is to pray for Paul in his ministry of communication,

that utterance may be given me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel.... that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak. (6.19-20)

So Ephesians is about a God of communication whose revelation and salvation inspire an intensity of fresh communication with God, towards the whole world and within the community. It is a holy dynamic which is essential to leading a life worthy of the Christian calling.

The letter to the Ephesians itself is a powerful example of this communication. Scholars are very puzzled by it in many ways - whether it was really Paul who wrote it, what situation it was written for, what the main influences on it were, and so on. But it does seem to be written for a community entering the second generation, facing up to the long haul and the need for a united church and strong families. It weaves together liturgical, preaching and teaching material, interpretation of Scripture, and wisdom, and it both repeats much of Colossians and also makes interesting changes. It is a distillation of matured faith, dense and complex, it thinks through the faith for a new context, and prays for the readers to receive the same spirit of wisdom and revelation that generated the letter. It receives a tradition and improvises upon it to build up a church in its situation. This is holy communication, holy writing, holy Scripture. And essential to it is an ethic of communication in kindness, gentleness, patience, compassion, forgiveness.

Anglican Interpretation of Scripture

That is of course by no means everything to be said about holiness, but it is especially relevant to our theme. Interpreting holy Scripture is part of this dynamic of communication. How is that to be done in line with Ephesians, so as to be open to the deep purposes of God, to build up the church in unity, truth and love, and nourish that intensity of Christian living which Ephesians encourages? First, two remarks about Ephesians and the early church before moving on to look at Anglicanism more closely.

(i) Ephesians and Early Church

First, Ephesians' own interpretation of its Old Testament Scriptures is instructive. It is as far from proof-texting as possible (its most obvious use in 4.8 is hardly a straightforward interpretation). But it is also immersed in Scripture. It is an inhabiting of the Old Testament and the Gospel together. There is no doubt that Scripture is utterly authoritative, but it is so as part of a dynamic life of worship, intensive communication and seeking fresh wisdom for the present and future.

It is also instructive to see how the key divisive issue is handled. The basic appeal is to the cross. This is so in two ways: the death of Jesus is seen as having broken down the dividing wall of hostility and abolished the law of commandments and ordinances; and this unity is to be sustained by an ethos grounded in the cross - lowliness, gentleness, patience, forbearing one another in love, kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness. That cross-centred community is the new 'holy temple'.

So in the face of the most divisive issue in the early church Scripture was certainly invoked, but the criterion is what is seen as the heart of the Gospel. This is in line with the practice in the patristic church of appealing to the rule or canon of truth, or the rule of faith. This could also be appealed to even when it was being decided

what the canon of Scripture should be. In really serious disputes between Christians the issue could never be settled simply by quoting Scripture. There had to be intensive conversation and debate, involving fresh engagement with key elements of faith embedded in credal statement and worship, and above all fresh engagement with Jesus Christ: learning the faith is basically 'learning Christ' .

Here we have something that has always been crucial to the Anglican interpretation of Scripture and, I think, to this meeting. It has looked back to the patristic period for its chief guidance. I think this still has a great many lessons in our situation. What might some of those lessons be? Many of you will have thought long and hard about this, and I look forward to hearing your discussion. Let me now just mention some features of patristic interpretation of Scripture that might be helpful:

1. It was not a matter of Scripture standing outside and over against the Church, but a whole *oikonomia*, a habitable ecology of Scripture interwoven with worship and sacraments, ordinary living, intensive conversation and debate in response to issues raised from inside and outside the church, and with the aim of long-term building up of the Church through teaching and developing church ministry and order. Yet within this there was no higher authority: the Bible was not domesticated.

2. Scripture was always at the centre of controversy and of rival bids to define Christian faith. The nature of Scripture itself was at issue, as was the core question of Jesus Christ in relation to God. At its best, what happened was that controversy stimulated the Church to reach a new level of understanding of itself and its faith.

Here are just two key instances of this:

- (a) deciding the canon of Scripture was a part of the process of Church formation, interwoven with the development of its worship and sacraments, its order, its creeds and its ethics. The canon of Scripture is an amazing achievement of unifying while leaving huge questions about the way it is a unity – Old and New Testaments, four different Gospels, the diversity of the epistles, and so on.

- (b) the Council of Nicea in 325 was the culmination of a long process of development and dispute. One insight was that the Church would have to innovate in its conceptuality (the *homoousion* affirming Jesus Christ as 'of one substance' with his Father) in order truly to express the heart of its faith. The dispute gave rise to a fresh and enduring articulation of 'the rule of faith' .

3. Nicea was also at the point of transition to Christianity to becoming the religion of the Empire. This was a deeply ambiguous, complex transition, raising a question that Anglicanism has usually tried to face in very different situations: in what ways should it take responsibility for the public good, for the flourishing of societies in which it lives and witnesses? This builds into our tradition at its best a wisdom formed in and through the dilemmas, conflicts and traumas of history.

4. The most fundamental lesson of those centuries with regard to the Bible, and one that the Reformation was so keen to relearn, was that the Bible is above all about teaching and learning. The key achievement was a new *paideia*, as Frances Young describes in her book, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge 1997). The Church itself was shaped and developed through a complex process of learning how best to interpret and inhabit Scripture in relation to a sophisticated culture

with its own rich literature and education. And at the heart of the alternative Christian education was discerning the unitive 'mind' of Scripture, assisted by practices of worship and sacraments, the rule of faith and later the creeds. There could be no short cuts to this. It was a mind shaped by the *oikonomia* of God, the overarching conception of God's ways with the world culminating in Jesus Christ, as in Ephesians 1.10. That was the ecology within which all sorts of intellectual, imaginative and practical developments - and differences - could flourish.

(ii) Reformation to the present

A great deal of importance happened between the early church and the Reformation, not least in learning how to 'inhabit' Scripture and to shape a whole culture and way of living - the Benedictine tradition was one of the strands which was to be of continuing importance within Anglicanism. But I will jump over an immense amount of formative history to another key school (and a very tough one) in which Anglicanism has learnt its interpretation of Scripture: the Reformation.

I think it is hard to overestimate how much there is still to be learnt from this, and not just in Europe. The Reformation together with the horrendous religious wars that followed it was the founding trauma of modern Europe, and in England included the Civil War. I think it is no exaggeration to say that in this period, in the eyes of many Europeans then and since, Christianity not only discredited itself but fundamentally failed. It failed above all to ensure the flourishing of societies. Large parts of Europe were devastated. We in Europe live in the aftermath of this failure, in which Christianity has been tried and found not only wanting but destructive in the public realm. Christianity gave rise to fragmentation, dissension, confusion and war as never before in its history.

But that was not all. There was at the same time an intensive attempt on both the Protestant and the Catholic sides, to re-identify the heart of Christian faith, to re-appropriate its basic dynamisms, to engage afresh with Scripture. Both sides tried to refashion history in conformity with their ideas - Lutheran, Calvinist, Roman Catholic. Anglicanism was a response to this lively and deadly conflict. It was a settlement, a Catholic and Reformed Christianity allied with historical realism and wisdom. Anglicanism is a Christian response to Christian failure and to Christian renewal. And both the failure and the renewal were inseparable from Scripture.

An acquaintance with the Reformation and post-Reformation controversies teaches several things: receiving the testimony of Scripture with faith is life-giving; yet a large number of contradictory positions can be argued from Scripture, and there is no end to divisiveness, schism and even violence if Scripture is used like that.

So the big questions are: how can the church feed on Scripture, inhabit Scripture, receive life through Scripture? How can it at the same time learn from the terrible history of uses of Scripture which, however sincere, have actually led to death, schism, bitterness and public disgrace to the Gospel?

My proposal has two parts. The first is that the Anglican Church at its best embodies a wise response to those questions, and not just a compromise but something which reaches through the conflicts and dilemmas to something richer.

Much can be learnt from Richard Hooker in that traumatic Reformation period. He faced deep conflict between rival ways of ordering the church, rival

understandings of the Eucharist and of much else, and an overall polarity between authoritarian solutions on the one hand and radical biblicist solutions on the other.

His response was, in essence, as follows:

- a deliberative wisdom in respectful conversation - in other words, a concern for holy communication;
- an insistence on a wisdom beyond Scripture which Scripture itself teaches you to seek; an emphasis on the things necessary for salvation;
- a refusal to allow certain non-fundamental issues to be church-dividing;
- a perspective which always recognised the importance of the flourishing of society;
- and a recognition of the need to draw lines, to acknowledge limits to diversity, and to develop a wisdom about this - how to draw lines, how to discern what issues are that fundamental, are actually necessary for salvation.

The question of what is church-dividing is especially important to this Meeting. Many who support Lambeth 1998 Resolution 1.10 on human sexuality yet do not think that it should become a church-dividing issue for the Anglican Communion. I think that this is in line with the wisdom of Scripture and tradition found in the early Church and the Anglican Reformation. Is the Communion to be broken over this? This is a very difficult matter which requires wisdom. It is worth considering very carefully the sort of unity, rooted in the cross and the will of God, described in Ephesians. Can we not, in the power of the cross sustain our Communion, our 'holy communication', our sharing in that whole ecology of blessing, however painful that might be? Can we keep that big picture as our guide, the 'unitive mind of Scripture' which Ephesians puts in terms of the *oikonomia* for the fullness of time' and Lambeth 1958 as 'the drama of the Bible'? Would it please Jesus Christ for this issue to be the occasion of the Anglican Communion fragmenting?

And would it be the last such divisive issue? Scripture is full of such divisive issues waiting to divide us further later. The Reformation and much else in Christian history makes this clear. Yet we have a wisdom tradition which was developed partly to meet such issues. There are other traditions and attitudes to Scripture which, however sincere, on the issue of maintaining unity based on the essentials of faith in the service of blessing have a bad track record.

Unity and peace are Gospel issues of the deep truth of Jesus Christ crucified and risen and as such are the best news for our world. Will this Meeting be a sign of such 'unity in the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph. 4.3).

Variations of those themes from Hooker have been characteristic of Anglicanism down the centuries and around the world. In most of our own lifetimes, Lambeth 1958 has already been mentioned; and Lambeth 1998 also had some classic examples.

The second part of my proposal is that this response is needed more than ever in our world. That European Reformation situation of religious conflict destroying peace and human flourishing in church and society has many parallels to the current global situation. Among the threats to world peace are many conflicts with strong religious elements. Part of the vocation of the Anglican Communion is to be a peacemaker in that situation and to represent a form of Christianity that does for today something equivalent to what Hooker represented in the sixteenth century and the Anglican settlement in the seventeenth century attempted after the Civil War.

At Lambeth 1998 I found that talking to bishops and others from many parts of the world this was part of the deep attraction of the Anglican way of being Christian. And I saw it at the plenary level most clearly in the plenary on Islam and Christianity. Bishops from Africa, the Middle East, Pakistan and Bradford gave statesmanlike addresses on the situations in their countries, each of them sensitive to the local complexities and to the larger issues. You could see an Anglican wisdom being developed to meet the situation that has, perhaps, the clearest potential to devastate our world in the next millennium, as we are already seeing in the Balkans, Sudan and most recently Kaduna. And something of the same quality was seen in the deliberations about international debt.

One of the key issues facing this meeting is what form this wisdom might take in relation to sexuality, the structures of the Communion, especially primacy, and taking Lambeth further on international debt. What is the wisest settlement?

As I see it, we will be discredited in what we say and do in relation to such matters as Islam and debt if we do not find the right settlement and wisdom on sexuality and primacy.

Primates and Scripture: three urgent matters

A great deal more could be said about all this, but in conclusion I want to make three suggestions about how you as Primates might help shape the Anglican Communion's relationship to Scripture in line with Anglican tradition.

(i) Full Human Flourishing

The first is that the Ephesians vision of full human flourishing in peace and love must be the overarching concern. Our Communion has to witness to the coming of the Kingdom of God, and has to take on responsibility towards all humanity, especially where people are suffering and in misery. We will be judged by our fruits. One sign of that on the agenda of this meeting is the concern with international debt, but that is only one of a host of concerns brought by you from your regions.

(ii) The Sub-Group on Human Sexuality at Lambeth 1998

Second, I want to attempt something that is somewhat risky but I hope worthwhile. I want to see the experience of the sub-group on human sexuality at Lambeth 1998 as an example of Anglican wisdom in action, and as a sign of holy communication and hope, a sign of obedience to the spirit of Ephesians. This account is based partly on the participation in that group by one of the Final Plenary team, Revd Timothy Jenkins, as well as on talking to members of it and listening on the Steering Committee to reports of its progress.

What I am focussing on is the process in that group of fifty or so bishops. They began extremely polarised and ended agreeing to a common statement which was not just empty or a vacuous compromise. It does not, of course, solve the problem, but it was a considerable achievement, and the way it happened is instructive. How did it happen?

1. It was happening in the context of shared worship, small group Bible study and living together, and with thorough preparation in study and conversation by key participants.
2. In the group there was a commitment to respectful conversation, based on a deep desire for unity. But neither of those were sufficient.

3. There was an able secretariat: three bishops undertook the secretarial and drafting role after the somewhat chaotic preliminary stages. They produced a draft proposal each day, circulated it, registered and coped with criticisms and disagreements, and redrafted it over-night. They had to be both trusted and able.
4. A fascinating process of coming to a common mind went on. At the heart of it were two complementary things.
 - i. The bishops had to allow a certain discretion or integrity to each other. No one was expected to give up a convinced position, for example on the way Scripture is to be understood; and it was recognised that bishops were not just individuals but representatives too, so that as individuals they were not just free to change their minds.
 - ii. The bishops also took into account the effects of their own position on other participants and dioceses. Would certain statements or actions be offensive elsewhere? They were offering to each other an imaginative understanding and compassion. It was very like what I have been describing in Ephesians as holy communication, speaking the truth in love and tenderheartedness, patience and forbearance, with a basic responsibility for upbuilding the church.

Overall, this can be seen as a model of Anglicanism in action:

an overarching setting of common worship integrated with Bible study; seeking unity and blessing for each other not through centralised authority or through fragmented liberty but by discipline and principle, inspired by compassion and realised by intensive conversation and very hard work. Discretion is granted but also responsibility is taken for the effects of one's own position on others. And the whole thing only works if there is delegation to a few who are trusted to produce something on behalf of all.

Sadly, at the level of the whole Conference, it was not possible to go through any comparable process, though in the circumstances the outcome was a considerable achievement. Perhaps this sets a double task for this meeting:

1. To have a comparable process here in relation to issues that are more demanding than the requirement to produce a sub-section report.
2. To work out a process and structure for Primacy in the Anglican Communion that draws on that sort of wisdom as well as doing justice to the Virginia Report.

Education in the Anglican Communion

Finally something that was virtually absent from the Lambeth 1998 agenda. Nearly every bishop I spoke with there was deeply concerned about the quality of learning and teaching the faith in his or her diocese (and the same has been true so far here in Porto). There was a very clear recognition of the basic fact: if the faith is not passed on there is no Church. This covered catechesis, further lay education and clergy education. It is clear that, in the sort of cultures that we are increasingly part of, education, knowledge, information plays a major role and has major effects on how faith is learned and sustained and matured. How do we learn Christ and grow up into him? How is this basic dimension of holy communication to flourish? There were huge anxieties about this area expressed by people from all parts of the world. It was also evident that the ways people are learning the faith in different parts of the Anglican Communion are very diverse, and this extends to clergy education too.

I was struck by the final resolution in the Japanese Church's repentance: 'To start and continue a program in each Diocese and Parish, to review the historical facts and to deepen our understanding of the Gospel.'

The biggest question for the future of the Anglican Communion seems to me to be about the quality of our shared faith and how that faith is learnt in ways that are shared. There was an immense amount of shared family understanding and feeling at Lambeth; but there are also massive forces eroding that understanding and sense of communion. The question is whether there can be ways of renewing and developing shared Anglican understanding, feeling, imagining and practising so that we are a global Communion in significant communication. At the heart of that is learning together, and working at understanding the faith today. If our structures do not serve this and if they do not enable, especially for those with leadership responsibilities, the formation of a common mind with a depth of Christian content, then I predict that the Lambeth Conference in 2018 will have far, far less of that shared family understanding and feeling. It may not even happen.

Obviously you as Primates need to be able to model this learning the faith and forming a common mind among yourselves; but in addition it seems to me to be a matter of the highest priority to devote time, energy and resources to this educational dimension of building long-term communion. And at the heart of that would seem to me to be intensive conversation around Scripture in the context of shared worship and responsibilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have been concerned to see Anglican interpretation of Scripture as essential to being a lively tradition in continuity with the early church, the Reformation and more recent Anglican history.

I have suggested that there is a wisdom about the generative potential of appeal to Scripture which shapes our tradition at its best and also a wisdom about the dangers in appealing to Scripture.

I have also argued that this is a vital wisdom for our world, giving us a vocation in line with the Ephesians vision of one new humanity in Christ. But this wisdom needs to be embodied in our holy communication, our processes of disciplined and compassionate discussion, and our polity.

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