

Flattened texts and Elephants (The Battle of the ex-Presidents on how to read the Basis of Union)

C. S. Lewis writes about theologians who claim to ‘read between the lines of the old texts’ when ‘the evidence is their obvious inability to read (in any sense worth discussing) the lines themselves’. Such theology, says Lewis, purports ‘to see fern-seed and can’t see an elephant ten yards away in broad daylight’.¹ This observation came to mind when I read James Haire’s response to the Assembly Standing Committee’s Report to the fifteenth Assembly and also the reply to James Haire by the Assembly Working Group on Doctrine. The Convenor of the Working Group is Alistair Macrae. Both James and Alistair are ex-Presidents of the Uniting Church. Both claim to uphold the Basis of Union. This interchange reveals the enormous gulf not only between their conclusions about ‘same-sex marriage’ but also, more seriously, about their methods of reading.

The Working Group’s reply to James Haire goes so far as to apologise to those who feel their position is inadequately represented by the Report to the Assembly. Yet the reply clearly wants to defend the position taken in the Report. For the sake of brevity I will refer to the reply to James Haire as ‘the Apology’, in both senses of defence and olive branch. I am on the side of James Haire and the elephants. I apologise in advance if I misrepresent the Report or the Apology. The gulf is such that it may be difficult to do more at present than to offer feedback about our view of the other side.

‘Fern-seed and Elephants’, read to a group of theological students in 1959, was written to counter demythologizing of the day. The current heirs of demythologizing continue to read between the lines, not only of the old texts but also, it appears, of the Basis of Union. ‘According to the Basis,’ states the Apology, ‘we are not so much “bound to Scripture”, but to the living God who leads us into the ongoing history of the church’s listening to, reading, and praying with the biblical witnesses’. The Apology does not explain how an alleged dichotomy between Scripture and the church’s experience of the living God accords with the Basis § 5: ‘When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, her message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses’.

The Apology alleges that James Haire’s appeal to the actual words of the Basis of Union ‘implies a flattening of the text of the Basis, a flattening which suspends the need to interpret words (be it of this or any other text)’. I would argue that the boot is on the other foot. Let us take the following statement from the Apology: ‘The Report is clear that the biblical witnesses are *lacking in positive endorsements of same gender relationships*’. The omission of ‘sexual’ in this context is no doubt inadvertent. ‘Lacking in positive endorsements’ of such relationships is, however, a definite understatement. If this is not an attempt to flatten the text, one might ask what is. The elephant is admittedly present but hardly three-dimensional in such thinking. And there is more to come. While agreeing that the biblical attitude is counter-cultural among the nations, the Apology draws the conclusion: ‘It would be theologically irresponsible and a failure of scholarship to transfer any “counter-cultural” framing of this issue directly from the first century and the context of the first Christians to our own century or our context’. It is theologically irresponsible, says the Apology, to be controlled by the biblical witnesses in this issue.

One cannot flatten an elephant without taking to the air. The Report states that its method does not ‘delegitimise traditional marriage nor unequivocally justify same-

¹ C. S. Lewis, ‘Fern-seed and Elephants’, *Fern-seed and Elephants* (Glasgow: Fount, 1975), p. 111.

gender marriage’: nevertheless it makes ‘doctrinal space for a legitimate consideration of the latter’ [p. 48]. Doctrinal space comes through reading between the lines. From there one has lift-off. The Apology implies that James Haire fails to take account of ‘the seminal Paragraph 3’ of the Basis, seemingly because Professor Haire does not read the Basis § 3 according to an air-borne trajectory. The Report attributes this trajectory to the New Testament writers, discerning ‘freedom, imagination and creativity’ deployed towards Scripture ‘under the intense pressure of spiritual novelty, to reimagine ... the purposes of God’. The Report suggests that ‘the early Church use of the Old Testament might inform the church’s thinking about departing from traditional teaching about marriage’ [p. 33]. This is to flatten the once for all givenness of the new covenant, ‘a new order of righteousness and love’ [§ 3] instituted ‘in and through the news of [Christ’s] completed work’ [§ 4]. Beware the elephants!

If one takes to the air, what then? The Report states: ‘The WGD believes that definitions of marriage do not belong to the substance, or heart, of the Christian faith’ [p. 8]. This determination is conducted without reference to the wider Church Catholic. Yet the Basis of Union ties the substance of the faith to ‘willingness to live and work within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as that way is described in this Basis’ [see § 14]. The Apology appeals to the Constitution Clause 2 which has a similar affirmation about the Uniting Church’s role *within* the faith and unity of the Church Catholic, followed by ‘guided by its Basis of Union’. “*Whatever guided may mean*”, says the Apology, ‘it is not over-ridden ... by an appeal to the “*words in the paragraphs*” of the Basis.’ If the words don’t ‘override’, what does? If ‘guided’ means riding above the words of the Basis on a journey of ‘freedom, imagination and creativity’, what becomes of our status as a ‘pilgrim people’? Pilgrims travel on foot. They don’t commonly belong to a theological jet set.

The Apology is confident that we will retain our status within the faith and unity of the Church Catholic in the event that the Assembly changes the definition of marriage, on the grounds that this is just one of the contentious issues which have not precluded ‘relationships of varying degrees of closeness’. (From the airy heights, the Assembly committees obviously discount the termination of Anglican-Uniting co-operating parishes in Tasmania, in relation to this contentious area.) ‘In any dialogue it is crucial that both parties know their mind and heart,’ says the Apology. (It may be crucial but it can’t be vital, unless the Assembly wants to invoke the Constitution 39 (a) and the Basis § 15 (e).) ‘Following the discernment of the Assembly we will be better placed to enter into dialogue and speak confidently on behalf of the Uniting Church’, continues the Apology. (This might be difficult while ex-Presidents disagree and many Uniting Church people faithfully hold strong and at time mutually exclusive convictions, according to Recommendation (a) of the Assembly Standing Committee’s proposals.) The Apology moots that we present ‘the Gospel of Jesus Christ in “fresh words and deeds”’ as light-bearers for the wider Church Catholic on this issue. (Isn’t our light-bearer role one of servant-hood and not fly-over sky-writing?)

To conclude on a more positive note, the Apology opens the door for further discussion in the key areas of theological method and the *imago Dei*. Let us be theologically responsible before it’s too late! Even more to the point, I suggest that the Assembly opens out the discussion to the whole Uniting Church *in the light of the Basis of Union* before coming to a decision on the marriage issue. This is far too important an area to be limited to ex-Presidents.

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