

The “dynamic of the gospel” Unveiled A Reflection on the ASC Report and the DWG Responses

The problem with the *ASC Report on Marriage* is a fundamental one. The writers of the ASC Report would most likely put the letters ‘ist’ after the word fundamental in order to discredit the raising of an important issue. But the Rev Terry Trewavas, an old-school liberal at the time, once told me, after an intense three hour discussion, “Walter, it is a sin to call yourself a fundamentalist.” I invited Terry to speak at my ordination after that exchange! On the other hand, in the late 1990s I was severely frowned upon in EMU circles for upholding the Basis of Union as a sound theological document. That led to co-editing and publishing a small book on the Basis of Union in 2000! That may help you to understand my theological stance.

My concern arises around the issue of how one determines the will of God for the one holy catholic and apostolic church, in the light of the Basis of Union. If it were simply a matter of ***pretending*** to seek the will of God for the sect of our own making, any old argument would do, suitably couched in scholarly language, so leaders can have their way. On the other hand, if we “believe one holy catholic and apostolic church” (Nicene Creed) as the guardian of The Faith, we have a much more difficult task. We cannot, willy-nilly, innovate simply because of movements in contemporary thought. That is the point of Paragraph 11 of the Basis of Union. It calls for spiritual discernment of the whole church in the light of the previous 10 paragraphs, because Paragraph 11 refers to ***faithful*** scholars.

Seeking the Will of God (p22 of the ASC Report on Marriage)

Paragraph 5 and 11 are indeed the paragraphs in the Basis of Union which give me cause to view the ASC Report with great unease. Nowhere in the report is there a full quote of Paragraph 5, but only these parts are referred to.

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which she hears the Word of God.

and

The Word of God on whom man’s salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church.

The full text, however, says the following

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which she hears the Word of God. **and by which her faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, her message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses.** The Word of God on whom man’s salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church. **The Uniting Church lays upon her members the serious duty of reading the Scriptures, commits her ministers to preach from these and to administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as effective signs of the Gospel set forth in the Scriptures.**

Clearly the writers of the ASC Report practise a **selective** reading of the Basis of Union. There is nothing wrong with being selective in itself. But a selection may be tendentious, avoiding critical aspects. I believe their selection is tendentious.

Let us have a look at the basic assumptions and the logic employed by the writers of the Report. They write,

[A]ny intentionally Christian interpretation of particular passages needs to be framed by Christian understandings of what the whole Bible is and why we are reading it in the first place.” (p23)

I agree whole heartedly with that sentiment. Three matters are raised by that statement.

1. Why are we reading the Bible in the first place?

The Basis of Union answers:

- (a) Because our faith and obedience are nourished and regulated by the biblical witness.
- (b) When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, her message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses.
- (c) The Word of God on whom man's salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church.

2. What is the Christian understanding of what the Bible is?

From the responses above we can see that the Bible sets parameters to our being church. The Bible is both story and command, hence the terms *nourish* and *regulate*. We are not nourished by commands, nor regulated by story (or we would go and hang ourselves, like Judas did!). It needs to be the other way round. And the story of God's dealings with humanity talks about covenants, and we live in the new covenant instituted by Christ through his death and resurrection. A lot more should be said, but these are the bare bones.

3. An intentionally Christian interpretation

What are we called to interpret? Is it the text itself, or some concept that scholars wish to see behind the text – a concept that does not fit into the over-all story of the Bible? To use the word *lens* employed in the report: using a *lens* to view Scripture that is not already steeped in Scripture, is neither nourishing, nor obedient. The intentional use of such a *lens* leads to an intentionally non-Christian interpretation, to apostasy, a falling away from the Faith of the church.

The writers of the ASC Report do not share these convictions arising from the Basis of Union (which points to Christ as presented in Scripture!). Therefore I disagree wholeheartedly with the “Christian understanding” the ASC Report promulgates in the previous pages. They write:

The Scriptures set forth the gospel as prophetic and apostolic testimony. In other words, Paragraph 5 never envisages the Bible as a flat text; it is presented as a collection of literature, the reading of which is **controlled by the dynamic of the gospel** and in the midst of the Church’s ongoing history of participation in Christ’s ministry of reconciliation. (p22)

Because I adhere to the Basis of Union, I say an emphatic but nuanced, NO to the part in bold. Of course, the Bible is not a flat text. Of course there is a development in the story of divine – human relationships. BUT:

1. Nowhere in the Report is there an acknowledgement of the change from an old to a new covenant. The New Testament is ever only mentioned as a document, not as the record of a *new* covenant. This is a serious flattening of the Biblical witnesses, a flattening that leads to an intentional interpretation that does not deserve the adjective Christian.
2. The reading of the Bible, as a collection of literature, is not to be “controlled by the dynamic of the gospel” (the content of the phrase is not yet clear!). According to the Basis of Union, it is the Bible itself that controls what we preach (and hopefully, say) about Jesus Christ:

When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, her message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses. (Para 5) -

The message is not controlled by some “dynamic of the gospel”, which may, or may not, be code for something like: *we would like to be more inclusive than the New Testament allows for*. [How dare one argue with the “dynamic of the gospel”?! Gospel!] If the phrase “dynamic of the gospel” is not such code for greater inclusion contrary to the Bible, then I am happy to stand corrected – but mere denial will not be accepted as correction. The phrase will need some careful unpacking.
3. Yes, I believe in the ongoing history of participation in Christ’s ministry of reconciliation. But shifting the goal posts via a dynamic of inclusion disallowed by the Bible does not lead to true reconciliation with God. Reconciliation is on God’s terms, and who are we to change those terms? Peter at Cornelius’ house (Acts 10), and the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, did not initiate changes, they responded to them. – Jesus Christ initiated the change, through his death and resurrection. The apostles responded to those events in the light of the promises of the prophets and hopes expressed in the psalms: that gentiles would come and worship the God of Abraham (Gen 12:3).

4. By “flattening” the Bible, by not acknowledging that the institution of a new covenant through Christ’s death and resurrection is the theme of the New Testament, the writers of the ASC Report make out that we can re-imagine God’s will to suit a new situation. This puts the Scriptures under the authority of those who re-imagine. The Report asserts that

“Scripture was used, under the intense pressure of spiritual novelty, to reimagine – or come to a new understanding of the purposes of God.”
(p33)

So I wonder what intense pressure of spiritual novelty one could refer to in our day, which would indicate that God has changed his mind on homosexual intercourse? People desiring approval of what the scriptures do not approve of, is not sufficient reason for change. I can pray and show some spiritual growth while I hold out on God with regard to a particular matter God says No to. On what basis do I (or others) then have a right to en claim that God has had a change of mind on that issue? Peter and the Council of Jerusalem were responding to the new covenant, initiated by external events of some magnitude, namely a death and a resurrection. The inclusion of the gentiles was not a novelty, it has always been a Jewish hope that all the earth would know and acknowledge God and enjoy worship and obedience, if one makes room for the Psalms.

Is the precipitating event for blessing marriage between two people by the church the approval of the state? Is it the invention of the condom which made homosexual intercourse safer? Is it drugs that curb the effects of AIDS? Is there a new Messiah on the scene? Have I missed some divine action which initiates this supposed third covenant promulgated by the ASC Report? Is the Assembly going to declare the apostolic testimony of the new covenant superseded?

The apostles had faced a death and a resurrection of someone who claimed to be one with the Father, in the context of Judaism. That was their springboard for change. But what is the springboard for this proposed third covenant so God’s people can respond by declaring homosexual intercourse is to be blessed in the name of God?

5. Bernard Lonergan has an interesting chapter in his *Method in Theology* which deals with interpretation. He carefully distinguishes between interpretation and *controversion*, (making texts say the opposite to what the writer intended, and opposite to what would be the plain meaning of the text at the time of its being written). The writers of the ASC Report do not seem to be aware of such a distinction. They have flattened more than the Bible and the Basis of Union in order to be able to develop their “dynamic of the gospel”.

The DWG's response to Prof James Haire's comments on the ASC Report reinforce my concerns with regard to Paragraph 11. The response makes this observation:

4. In any dialogue it is crucial that both parties know their own mind and heart. Following the discernment of the Assembly we will be better placed to enter into dialogue and speak confidently on behalf of the Uniting Church.

How does one speak confidently on behalf of the UCA, when it is acknowledged that there are mutually exclusive positions held by its members? The intention seems to be to flatten church members who disagree with the Assembly. Be that as it may, the members of the DWG wanted to make up their own minds in isolation, it seems. The Assembly members will determine God's will on their own. They think they have the gifts and graces necessary for this task. This attitude seems to go against the Basis of Union's view of the Uniting Church in Paragraph 11:

*She lives **within a world-wide fellowship** of Churches **in which** she will learn to sharpen her understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought. **Within that fellowship** she also stands in relation to contemporary societies in ways which will help her to understand her own nature and mission.*

If the proposals are carried, the Assembly will have set itself up as an outside partner in a dialogue with a fixed position (knowing their own mind and heart). Apparently, the Assembly and the DWG are sharp enough to deem it unnecessary to **shape** their opinions in the world-wide fellowship of the church – they just consulted with like-minded Western denominations overseas. Dare I say, it smacks of another flattening, a selectivity which the Letter of Jude warns against?

A deeply disturbing aspect of this Report arises from the paper on First Peoples recognition. In that paper the uniting churches are lambasted for being so thoroughly influenced by the philosophy of the day that the Gospel was hidden from many of the First Peoples: many people in the uniting churches had succumbed to the spirit of the age. And I do not want to dispute that.

How then can the writers of the ASC Report on Marriage be so confident that they have it right this time? Are they not succumbing to the spirit of the age by biblical contorsion, when they assert a "dynamic of the gospel" that leads to the adoption of unbiblical views of sexuality? Are they not repeating the error of the past, hiding the Gospel from the First Peoples, and many others as well?

The one holy catholic and apostolic church rejects a third covenant arising from the "dynamic of the gospel" of inclusion. If the Assembly persists in this error, I may wake up one day in July and find myself the member of a sect.

Walter Abetz (Rev)
26th June 2018