

TO: The Primates and Bishops of the Anglican Communion.

Rowan Williams and Romans 1:

The Archbishop of Canterbury's attempt, in "The Bible Today: Reading and Hearing," to undermine Romans 1 as a basis for opposing his teaching that the Church should approve of same gender sexual relations.

Williams's lecture and the press.

On April 16, 2007, the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams gave a lecture to divinity students in Toronto, in which he chose to try to advance his teaching that the Church should approve of same gender sexual relations.¹ Under the mantle of giving the students guidelines on how to read Scripture, Williams attacked the use of Chapter 1 of Scripture's Book of Romans as a basis to oppose his teaching. The lecture was printed and published under the title, "The Bible Today: Reading and Hearing."

Williams's comments on Romans 1 received wide publicity. On April 17, Reuters's Religious Editor reported on the lecture under the headline "Anglican head Williams says anti-gays misread Bible."² The article begins by saying:

The spiritual leader of the world's 77 million Anglicans has said conservative Christians who cite the Bible to condemn homosexuality are misreading a key passage written by Saint Paul almost 2,000 years ago.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, addressing theology students in Toronto, said an oft-quoted passage in Paul's Epistle to the Romans meant to warn Christians not to be self-righteous when they see others fall into sin.

His comments were an unusually open rebuff to conservative bishops, many of them from Africa, who have been citing the Bible to demand that pro-gay Anglican majorities in the United States and Canada be reined in or forced out of the Communion.

This paper's three purposes.

The first purpose of this paper is to make Williams's audience aware that Williams's lecture is a move towards his goal of obtaining the Church's approval of same gender sexual relations. The second purpose is to show that Williams violates his own

guidelines for reading Scripture in commenting on Romans 1. The third purpose is to show that Williams's rejection of Romans 1 as a basis for opposing the Church's approval of same gender sexual relations goes far beyond a matter of interpretation to a claim that the prohibition of such conduct wherever and however it appears in Scripture does not accurately reflect "the mind of God."

Williams's guidelines and his application thereof to Romans 1.

In the lecture, Williams gives guidelines on how to read and listen to Scripture. One of the guidelines is that a passage of Scripture should be read in its context and with a view of what is "moving" it, because if the passage is considered in isolation it is susceptible to misinterpretation and misapplication. Williams cites two examples of passages of Scripture that he says have been subjected to such isolated interpretation and have therefore been misinterpreted and misapplied. The second of these examples is Chapter 1 of Romans.

The passage in Romans 1 to which Williams probably refers is the following:

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. 25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

26 Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. 27 In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

28 Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. 29 They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; 31 they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32 Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.³

In the portion of the lecture concerning Romans 1, Williams states:

My second example is even more contentious in the present climate; and once again I must stress that the point I am making is not that the reading I proposes [*sic*] settles a controversy or changes a substantive interpretation but that many current ways of reading miss the actual direction of the passage and so undermine a proper theological approach to Scripture. Paul in the first chapter of Romans famously uses same-sex relationships as an illustration of human depravity -- along with other 'unnatural' behaviours such as scandal, disobedience to parents and lack of pity. It is, for the majority of modern readers the most important single text in Scripture on the subject of homosexuality, and has understandably been the focus of an enormous amount of exegetical attention.

What is Paul's argument? And, once again, what is the *movement* that the text seeks to facilitate? The answer is in the opening of chapter 2: we have been listing examples of the barefaced perversity of those who cannot see the requirements of the natural order in front of their noses; well, it is precisely the same perversity that affects those who have received the revelation of God and persist in self-seeking and self-deceit. The change envisaged is from confidence in having received divine revelation to an awareness of universal sinfulness and need. Once again, there is a paradox in reading Romans 1 as a foundation for identifying *in others* a level of sin that is not found in the chosen community.

Now this gives little comfort to either party in the current culture wars in the Church. It is not helpful for a 'liberal' or revisionist case, since the whole point of Paul's rhetorical gambit is that everyone in his imagined readership *agrees* in thinking the same-sex relations of the culture around them to be as obviously immoral as idol-worship or disobedience to parents. It is not very helpful to the conservative either, though, because Paul insists on shifting the focus away from the *objects* of moral disapprobation in chapter 1 to the reading /hearing *subject* who has been up to this point happily identifying with Paul's castigation of someone else. The complex and interesting argument of chapter 1 about certain forms of sin beginning by the 'exchange' of true for false perception and natural for unnatural desire stands, but now has to be applied not to the pagan world alone but to the 'insiders' of the chosen community. Paul is making a primary point not about homosexuality but about the delusions of the supposedly law-abiding.

As I have said, this does nothing to settle the exegetical questions fiercely debated at the moment. But I want to stress that what I am trying to define as a strictly theological reading of Scripture, a reading in which the present community is made contemporary with the world in front of the text, is bound to give priority to the question that the text specifically puts and to ask how the movement, the transition, worked for within the text is to be realised in the contemporary reading community. To move too rapidly to the use of the text to make a general point which does not require the reader to be converted is to step outside what I have been calling the time of the text, the process by which it shapes its question. It is to make the text more passive than active, and so to move away from the stance of the listener, from the stance of the Church as trying to be still enough to hear and free enough to respond to God's summons to be his community. Of course the work of exegesis to establish doctrine and ethics is unavoidable; commentary is always going on. But the first moment of commentary -- if this emphasis on the basic character of listening is correct -- needs to be the tracing of the 'time' of a text so as to chart where it is moving.

In these passages of his lecture, Rowan Williams contends that Paul's primary purpose in Romans 1 was not to condemn same gender sexual relations, but to teach persons not engaged in such conduct to be conscious of their own sins. Williams argues that Romans 1 moves to Romans 2 and therefore must be read in the context of

Romans 2. According to Williams, Paul's purpose for describing same gender sexual relations as depraved conduct was not to warn against such conduct which Paul's listeners already considered to be sinful. Instead, Williams says, Paul's purpose in Romans 1 was to set the stage to remind his listeners in Romans 2 that they themselves were engaged in sinful behavior of other kinds. Williams thus tries to chip away at Romans 1 as a direct basis for opposing the Church's approval of same gender sexual relations by suggesting that Paul's comments are "passive" rather than "active."⁴

Williams's lecture moves toward his goal of obtaining the Church's approval of same gender sexual relations.

In considering Williams's argument, it seems fair to apply his own guidelines to his own lecture. Just as Williams would have his audience understand the alleged movement of Paul in Romans 1 towards Romans 2 and the context in which Paul was writing, they should understand the end towards which Williams was moving in giving the lecture and the context in which he gave it.

It is therefore important that anyone who listened to or may read the lecture be aware of the following facts, which are fully described in other papers.⁵ Williams: (1) was one of the prime movers in starting the controversy over whether the Church should approve of same gender sexual relations by teaching in favor thereof; (2) has been an active leader of the movement to obtain such approval for almost twenty years; (3) has continuously sought ways to reject Scripture's prohibition of same gender sexual relations; (4) continues to teach that the Church should approve of same gender sexual relations despite repeated calls that he repent thereof; and (5) is using the powers of his office as the spiritual and institutional leader of the Anglican Communion to obtain the approval of such conduct by all of the churches in the Communion. In light of this record, it is not unreasonable to conclude that Williams's attempt to undermine Romans

1 as a direct basis for opposing his teaching that the Church should approve of same gender sexual relations is a “move” towards his goal of obtaining such approval.

This conclusion is buttressed by Williams’s choice of Romans 1 as one of his two examples. Of all of the hundreds of passages he could have used to illustrate his guidelines, he chose one that he himself says “is for the majority of modern readers the most important single text in Scripture on the subject of homosexuality, and has understandably been the focus of an enormous amount of exegetical attention.” While, as will be seen, Romans 1 is not the most significant text for opposing Williams’s teaching that the Church should approve of same gender sexual relations, it certainly is one upon which many of his opponents rely and which he, as will be seen, has been trying to avoid for years. Consequently, it appears that Williams thinks he has figured out a new way to get around Romans 1 and used the lecture to publicize it.

Williams violates his own guidelines by ignoring Leviticus 18 and Acts 15.

Williams violates his own guidelines when he addresses Romans 1 and 2 in isolation from the rest of Scripture. In particular, Williams totally ignores Chapter 18 of Leviticus and Chapter 15 of Acts.

Leviticus 18 sets forth a comprehensive set of commandments concerning with whom men and women may not have sexual relations. These commandments, referred to in Article VII of the Church of England’s Articles of Religion as “the moral commandments of the law given from God by Moses,” expressly prohibit men and women from engaging in sexual relations with persons of their own sex as well as their parents, siblings, other close relatives, and animals.

This can be seen from a reading of the whole Chapter 18 of Leviticus:

1 The LORD said to Moses, 2 "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'I am the LORD your God. 3 You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. 4 You must

obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God. 5 Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD.

6 " 'No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations. I am the LORD.

7 " 'Do not dishonor your father by having sexual relations with your mother. She is your mother; do not have relations with her.

8 " 'Do not have sexual relations with your father's wife; that would dishonor your father.

9 " 'Do not have sexual relations with your sister, either your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether she was born in the same home or elsewhere.

10 " 'Do not have sexual relations with your son's daughter or your daughter's daughter; that would dishonor you.

11 " 'Do not have sexual relations with the daughter of your father's wife, born to your father; she is your sister.

12 " 'Do not have sexual relations with your father's sister; she is your father's close relative.

13 " 'Do not have sexual relations with your mother's sister, because she is your mother's close relative.

14 " 'Do not dishonor your father's brother by approaching his wife to have sexual relations; she is your aunt.

15 " 'Do not have sexual relations with your daughter-in-law. She is your son's wife; do not have relations with her.

16 " 'Do not have sexual relations with your brother's wife; that would dishonor your brother.

17 " 'Do not have sexual relations with both a woman and her daughter. Do not have sexual relations with either her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter; they are her close relatives. That is wickedness.

18 " 'Do not take your wife's sister as a rival wife and have sexual relations with her while your wife is living.

19 " 'Do not approach a woman to have sexual relations during the uncleanness of her monthly period.

20 " 'Do not have sexual relations with your neighbor's wife and defile yourself with her.

21 " 'Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.

22 " 'Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.

23 " 'Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it. A woman must not present herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it; that is a perversion.

24 " 'Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. 25 Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. 26 But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things, 27 for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. 28 And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you.

29 " 'Everyone who does any of these detestable things—such persons must be cut off from their people. 30 Keep my requirements and do not follow any of the detestable customs that were practiced before you came and do not defile yourselves with them. I am the LORD your God.'" (Boldface added).

Chapter 15 of Acts makes it clear that these commandments of God not to engage in same gender sexual relations and other forms of sexual immorality described in Leviticus 18 are part of the New Covenant binding on all Christians. Acts 15 describes the fact that the Council of Jerusalem, presided over by James, and attended by Peter and Paul, as well as all the other apostles and elders, addressed the question of whether "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."⁶ After Peter, Paul, and Barnabas spoke, James ruled that the Gentiles must obey the law of Moses concerning sexual immorality, as follows:

"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.⁷ (Emphasis added).

The apostles and elders with the whole Church issued the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul - men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.⁸ (Emphasis added).

The distinction made by the Council of Jerusalem between the ceremonial and moral commandments of the law given from God by Moses is embodied in the Church of England's Articles of Religion. Article VII specifically provides that such moral commandments are binding on all members of the Church, as follows:

Although the law given from God by Moses, as touching ceremonies and rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth; yet, notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral. (Emphasis added).

Consequently, everything that is said in Romans 1 or any of the other texts of the New Testament about same gender sexual relations is said in the context of the moral commandments of the law given from God by Moses set forth in Leviticus 18. The moral commandments were imposed on all Christians by the Council of Jerusalem. Romans,

as well as 1Corinthians, 1Peter, and Jude, were all written after the Council of Jerusalem by participants therein.

Williams's failure to mention Leviticus 18 and Acts 15 is directly contrary to his argument for the necessity of considering movement and context. Williams is right to consider the context of Romans 1:18ff. within the Epistle to the Romans, however this context in no way indicates that the Apostle views homosexual inclination and practice as anything but a profound expression of human sin, nor does consideration of the context in the Epistle give any reason to ignore the wider context of Paul's writing and the general teaching of the whole of Scripture on the sinfulness of homosexual inclination and behavior. In fact, it is impossible to fairly read Romans 1 outside of the context of Leviticus 18 and Acts 15. By doing so, Williams does exactly what he condemns in his lecture – taking a text in isolation.

Williams's reasons for ignoring Leviticus 18 and Acts 15.

One might ask why Williams would fail to mention Leviticus 18 and Acts 15, when they so obviously relate to the matter of same gender sexual relations referred to in Romans 1. The question is made more poignant by the fact that the commandments are expressly incorporated in the professed faith of the Church of England by Article VII of its Articles of Religion, which Williams, as the head of the Church, should know and follow. One can, of course, only guess at the answer. However, a likely reason for Williams's omission of any reference to Leviticus 18 and Acts 15 is that he believes that Leviticus 18 and the other texts of Scripture which prohibit same gender sexual relations do not accurately represent the "mind of God."

Williams so decided some twenty-five years ago. As Williams said in a press interview in 2002, during the course of his experience of "being the spiritual director to people of the homosexual orientation," he "did come to a point where" he "could no

longer say that the Biblical account answers all of the questions we have or want to ask.”⁹

Prompted by this experience, Williams set about to provide in his writings a theological justification for the Church’s approval of same gender sexual relations, despite Scripture’s prohibition of such conduct. Williams began doing so in 1989 when he published The Body’s Grace.¹⁰ In The Body’s Grace, Williams: (1) propounded the thesis that same gender sexual relations in committed and loyal unions are compatible with the Christian faith; (2) dismissed reliance on Scripture’s prohibition thereof as “an abstract fundamentalist deployment of a number of very ambiguous biblical texts¹¹,” and (3) “suspected” and called for “a fuller exploration of the sexual metaphors of the Bible...to teach us about a theology and ethics of sexual desire than will the flat citation of isolated texts.”¹²

Williams went further in 1994 with the publication of a collection of his sermons and essays in the book, Open to Judgement.¹³ In Open to Judgement, Williams dismisses Scripture as a reliable source for discerning “the mind of God.” Williams contends therein that we should not read Scripture with “a kind of blind and thoughtless obedience to every word of scripture as if it simply represented the mind of God.”¹⁴ Williams then asserts that the reason we should not do so is that the “writers of scripture” were “caught up in the blazing fire of God’s gift...yet struggle[d] with it, misapprehend[ed] it, and misread it.”¹⁵ In short, Williams says we cannot rely on Scripture because the writers thereof did not correctly discern “the mind of God.”

As applied to Leviticus 18, Williams thus teaches that we cannot rely on the moral commandment prohibiting same gender sexual relations set forth therein because the writer thereof did not correctly discern “the mind of God.” In other words, Williams teaches that the opening verse of Leviticus 18 “The Lord said to Moses” is false.

In 1997, in a lecture, "Knowing Myself in Christ", Rowan Williams not only confirmed his low view of the authority of Scripture, but also set forth his alternative to Scripture for determining that same gender sexual relations should be approved by the Church. The lecture was published in The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church.¹⁶ The book contains essays by notable proponents and opponents of the Church's approval of same gender sexual relations. By the time the book was conceived of, Williams and his long-time working colleague Canon Jeffrey John had become famous advocates of such approval and were invited to contribute to the book.

Much of the debate in the book is centered on Romans 1. In "Knowing Myself in Christ," Williams posed the rhetorical question of whether:

a description of 'homosexual behaviour' and desire centered around Romans 1 can be given a privileged position over, let us say, a conscientious self-description by a homosexual person in terms of his or her longing to live a life in which their sexual desire, like other aspects of their identity, can come to image the love and justice of Christ.¹⁷

In this rhetorical question Williams shows his low view of Scripture's authority. Williams's use of the term "privileged position" to refer to the status of Scripture and his suggestion that such position may be overcome by the experience of the "longing" of homosexual persons make it absolutely clear that he does not accept Scripture's sovereign authority over the Church.

Williams also reveals the ground upon which he justifies the Church's approval of same gender sexual relations. He says that when same gender sexual relations are conducted in a certain manner, they "can come to image the love and justice of Christ."¹⁸ In other words, the love and justice of Christ is not expressed in what Paul writes in Romans 1. Instead, "the love and justice of Christ" is found in the experiential "longing"

of homosexual persons. Williams said essentially the same thing in the interview he gave to the Nederlands Dagblad in August 2006.¹⁹

Conclusion.

It would be well for everyone who heard or may read “The Bible Today: Reading and Hearing” to understand that the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams is not a disinterested mediator in the controversy over the teaching that the Church should approve of same gender sexual relations, and that his comments on Romans 1 are not impartial. Rowan Williams teaches that the Church should approve of sexual practices which: (1) God condemns in the strongest possible terms in Leviticus 18, as well as throughout the Old and New Testaments; (2) were made binding on all Christians by the Council of Jerusalem; and (3) are binding on all members of the Church of England by its Articles of Religion. Williams rejects the authority of Scripture by teaching that its prohibition of same gender sexual relations does not accurately express “the mind of God” because Moses and Paul, as well as the other writers of Scripture, misapprehended and misread the “mind of God.” Williams is using his powers as the spiritual and institutional leader of the Anglican Communion to move towards the acceptance of his teachings by all of the Communion’s churches. Williams’s lecture is one more move towards that objective.

The Society for the Propagation of Reformed Evangelical Anglican Doctrine

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The Society is dedicated to the preservation and propagation of the Anglican Faith, as defined by “the Anglican Formularies” comprised of the Church of England’s Articles of Religion, 1662 Book of Common Prayer and Ordinal.

The Society may be reached at: <http://www.anglicanspread.org/>

Endnotes:

¹ http://www.anglican.ca/news/news.php?newsItem=20070416_abc.news.

² <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSL1767470620070417>.

³ This and all other quotations and citations of Scripture are from the NIV Bible, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1984.

⁴ For a cogent critique of Rowan Williams's comments on what Paul states in Romans 1 in light of what Paul states elsewhere in Scripture, see "Rowan Williams' Wrong Reading of Romans" by Robert A. J. Gagnon, Associate professor of New Testament, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, April 19, 2007. (<http://robgagnon.net/RowanWilliams'WrongReading.htm>).

⁵ See Rowan Williams and Scripture: A Review of the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams's Teachings and Use of His Powers Concerning the Authority of Scripture, the Society for the Propagation of Reformed Evangelical Anglican Doctrine, February 2007, see http://www.anglicanspread.org/xm_client/client_documents/Williamsandscripture.pdf.

⁶ Acts 15:5.

⁷ Acts 15:19-21.

⁸ Acts 15:23-29.

⁹ A Line in the Sand, Reform and Rowan Williams, David Holloway, October 2002, citing interview, Anglican Media, Melbourne.

¹⁰ The Body's Grace, London: Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement and the Institute for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality, 1989, 2nd ed. 2002; Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings, Blackwell Publishing, Malden MA, Oxford England, Victoria Australia, 2002, p. xvi; Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, August 27, 2006, <http://www.lgcm.org.uk/html/AngText03.html>.

¹¹ Id. p 320.

¹² Id.

¹³ Open to Judgement, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994, repr. 1996, 2001, 2002.

¹⁴ Id. p 159.

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church, London: Hodder & Stoughton, T. Bradshaw Ed., 1997.

¹⁷ Id. p. 17.

¹⁸ Id.

¹⁹ Nederlands Dagblad, Wim Houtman, August 21, 2006, <http://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/archives/001878.html>. The concept is given full expression by Jeffrey John, in his book, 'Permanent, Faithful, Stable': Christian Same-Sex Partnerships,

published by the Affirming Catholicism movement, which Williams co-founded with John and others. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., in association with Affirming Catholicism, 1993, revised ed. 2000, 2004).