

Doctrine Commission response to Archbishop Rowan Williams' Larkin-Stuart Lecture 'The Bible Today: Reading & Hearing', delivered 16 April 2007

(A response from the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission.)

1. The Larkin-Stuart Lecture

On 16 April 2007 Archbishop Rowan Williams delivered a special Larkin-Stuart lecture entitled 'The Bible Today: Reading and Hearing' at a joint convocation of Trinity and Wycliffe Colleges in Toronto. The text of the lecture is available online at www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/070416.htm. It picked up issues he has addressed elsewhere but this lecture in particular has rightly been the subject of considerable comment almost since the moment it was presented.

The lecture is highly significant for three reasons. *Firstly*, it is delivered by Rowan Williams, 104th Archbishop of Canterbury, who took up the office after an impressive academic career. He has a reputation as a man of extraordinary intellect who brings a new level of academic rigour and intellectual sophistication to any issue he addresses. *Secondly*, the issue he is addressing is a vital one: the proper reading of the Bible in the twenty-first century. Christian theology has, from the very beginning, anchored itself in the teaching of Scripture as the written word of God which has final authority when it comes to any exposition of the nature of God or of his purposes in the world. *Thirdly*, twenty-first century Christianity and in particular Anglicanism, is bedevilled by a number of paralysing controversies where appeal is made by one side or the other to the teaching of Scripture. The differences between Christians today over what the Bible is actually saying on these issues has given new prominence to questions of biblical interpretation. What is at stake is our access to a clear word from God, not just on the controverted issues of the moment but on some of the most basic doctrines of the Christian faith.

This response respectfully dissents from much of the argument of Archbishop Williams' lecture. What appears at first to provide a helpful and theological reading of important biblical texts actually results in a silencing of those texts on the basis of a highly selective mis-reading of their respective contexts.

2. An Outline of the Argument

The language and mode of argument employed make analysis of this lecture rather difficult. At points the argument disappears behind what one critic has described as 'ethereal ambiguity'. Nevertheless, what follows is an attempt to understand what Archbishop Williams has to say on his own terms.

(a) *Introduction*

The expressed aim of Rowan Williams' lecture is 'to examine the practice of reading the Bible so as to tease out some of what it tells us about the nature of Christian identity itself'. He is also seeking 'a more serious theological grasp of the Church's relation with Scripture' which avoids 'theologically inept or rootless accounts of Scripture' such as the kind of biblicism that emphasises inerrancy or the kind of liberalism that reduces the Bible to simply a text of its time (p. 1).

(b) *Lessons from the public character of Scripture*

Williams' reflection upon the importance of the Church's public reading of Scripture leads him to insist that what is read is principally 'a summons to assemble together as a certain sort of community'. Furthermore, the basic posture of the Church is that of 'listening to the act of [...] calling together', i.e. responding to an invitation (p. 2).

The 'primary implications of the practice of hearing Scripture publicly' are presented by Williams in the form of two principles. (1) Scripture is originally addressed to a specific audience and when it is read today we are being asked to imagine that the original audience is 'not only continuous with us but in some sense one with us'. (2) Scripture is intended to effect change in its hearers and it is misused when our reading is dominated by questions arising from our own context rather than the questions the text itself intends to ask (p. 3).

A neglected but necessary skill for the appropriate receptivity is 'the capacity to read/hear enough to sense the directedness of a text' or recognising 'a rhetorical process or argument'. Put negatively, this means avoiding 'fragmentary reading' (p. 4).

(c) *Two examples*

Williams admits at the outset that his two examples are contentious. They are also critical texts in the contemporary struggles within the Anglican Communion. The first is John 14:6b — 'no-one comes to the Father except by me'. He insists that when this text is seen as the conclusion to an exposition of Jesus' death as 'the necessary clearing of the way which they [the original disciples] are to walk', i.e. when it is seen in the context of John 13 and the love that makes their own love possible, it becomes clear that 'the actual question being asked is not about the fate of non-Christians'. Indeed, any appeal to this text as an exclusive claim for the Christian institution or system risks becoming 'a way of affirming the necessity of Christ's crucified mediation that has the effect of undermining the very way it is supposed to operate' (p. 5).

The second example is Romans 1:26–27, a text misused by many who 'miss the actual direction of the passage'. Rather than drawing attention to same-sex relationships as an illustration of human depravity, following the movement of the passage into the opening verses of Romans 2 reveals that the real emphasis is on 'the delusions of the supposedly law-abiding'. Paul is seeking to move his

hearers/readers 'from confidence in having received divine revelation to an awareness of universal sinfulness and need'. Once again it is possible to read this text against the grain as 'a foundation for identifying in others a level of sin that is not found in the chosen community' (pp. 5–6). A part of the Bible intended to challenge judgementalism within the Christian community can hardly be used as a text by which to judge others.

(d) The importance of connections, paradoxes, tensions and the 'risk' of Scripture

The relationship between the way the text operated amongst its original recipients and the way it operates in the world of today's hearers/readers is described by Williams as 'an analogy of situation' in which we discern in the connections between elements of the text a movement which also operates in the present reader's world making the same demands. This process is already at work in the New Testament, which often traces the connections between Old Testament texts in order to articulate the same summons and challenge to its readers. Some of those connections are undoubtedly paradoxical, some involve an element of tension and expose 'internal debates in Scripture'. Nevertheless these features need to be acknowledged alongside an overarching 'narrative of fulfilment' (pp. 7–8).

Scripture as a written text inevitably has a dual character. While on the one hand it is a finished product which in some ways can be treated as a definite object, on the other it 'continuously generates new events of interpretation'. Both aspects are open to misunderstanding. The writtenness of the text risks the appearance of passivity; the re-readability of the text risks the appearance of indeterminacy (p. 9).

(e) Reading Scripture in the context of the Eucharist

'The Word of God that acts in the Bible is a Word directed towards those changes that bring about the Eucharistic community.' Williams is convinced that for Paul 'the celebration of the Lord's Supper is strictly bound up with the central character of the community' and so 'if Scripture is to be heard as summons or invitation before all else, this is what it is a summons to'. This leads him to insist that Scripture and Eucharist need to be held together 'if we are to have an adequate theology of either'. This can only be done by means of a theology of the Spirit (pp. 10–11).

The dangers of treating Scripture without regard for this critical context are exemplified by both biblicism and liberalism. The former tends to treat the Bible as 'an inspired supernatural guide for individual conduct'; the latter treats it as 'a piece of a detached historical record' (p. 11).

(f) *Understanding Scripture and belief in the resurrection*

Both the Eucharist and Scripture alike must be considered in relation to belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. On the one hand, 'the Eucharist is not the memorial of past meals with Jesus but the reality of contemporary response to his hospitality'. Christ's transforming hospitality is renewed constantly in the history of the Church. On the other hand, 'if [Scripture] is not the present vehicle of God speaking in the risen Christ, it is a record only of God speaking to others' (p. 12).

3. Appreciation

Before developing a detailed critique of Williams' argument and presenting an alternative exegesis of the two biblical passages the Archbishop uses as his chief illustrations, it is important to give due weight to those aspects of the lecture which are positive and constructive.

- i. His call to 'read Scripture theologically' is welcome in the light of two and half centuries of biblical interpretation dominated in some circles by historical and literary criticism.
- ii. His appreciation of Scripture as, at its core, 'an act of communication that requires to be heard and answered' (p. 2) is also both welcome and refreshing. Though he has not addressed the source of the summons and does not develop an understanding of Scripture as the word of God (even appearing at one point rather reticent to affirm it as 'God's Word written', p. 1) his presentation of the Christian assembly as essentially a community that listens to the summons of Scripture is more constructive than many contemporary accounts. He is willing to acknowledge that Scripture is 'finally normative in some sense for the community' (though we might ask why the words 'in some sense' were necessary in this acknowledgement).
- iii. Similarly helpful is his acknowledgement that Scripture summons the Christian community not simply to 'being in the abstract' but 'specific, self-identifying action, action that seeks to embody the Kingdom'. Following Vanhoozer at this point, he explains this in terms of a reproduction of 'those patterns of faithful response spelled out in the narrative' (p. 8). While there is certainly more to be said (and performance models of biblical interpretation such as that of Vanhoozer and others only go so far) his treatment here could be paraphrased in Paul's terms as the goal of 'the obedience of faith'.
- iv. His insistence upon a contextual reading of particular texts is a restatement of an important principle of biblical interpretation. Little is to be gained from 'fragmentary reading' (p. 4).
- v. His identification of the danger of reading the biblical texts with our own agenda ('processed into whatever most concerns us now', pp. 3-4) is critically important. We are indeed 'bound to give priority to the question that the text specifically puts' (p. 6),

though there need not always be only *one* question addressed by each text.

- vi. His resistance to notions of either a purely passive text manipulated by the interpreter or indeterminacy of meaning (p. 9) involves an important counter to some postmodern excesses.
- vii. His almost tacit acknowledgement of a basic coherence to the Bible (p. 11), which is not unrelated to its proper use within the community of faith, is also helpful.

4. Critique

Notwithstanding the helpful aspects of this lecture identified above, it is deeply flawed at a number of points.

- i. Ironically, Archbishop Williams' principles, particularly as these are applied to the two biblical texts he cites, actually result in a 'fragmentary reading', the very thing he seeks to avoid. This happens in two ways. In the first instance, much of Williams' description of the 'rhetorical process' or 'movement' is quite arbitrary. He draws attention to certain features of the immediate context while neglecting others. Why, for instance, does he relate John 14:6 to the preceding chapter, and especially John 13:34–35, and not also to the following verses (especially verses 7–11) where Jesus' exclusive claim about himself—a claim caricatured by Williams as 'the exclusive claim of the Christian institution or the Christian system' (p. 5)—is explained in terms of the uniqueness of his relationship to the Father? Why is Romans 1 related to the opening verses of Romans 2 but not to the earlier verses of Romans 1 or indeed the rest of the argument in Romans 2 and 3? Williams' reasons for privileging some elements of the context over others are never explained and so we are left with the impression that external factors are determining the way he reads these texts.
- ii. The second way in which the Archbishop leaves us with a fragmentary reading is by neglecting to integrate each text into a biblical systematic theology; i.e. an understanding of God and his purposes which arises from the Bible as a whole. He acknowledges that 'the work of exegesis to establish doctrine and ethics is unavoidable' but in this lecture he refuses to go beyond 'the first moment of commentary' (p. 6). While he protests against an approach to John 14:6 as 'an isolated text' which insists 'that salvation depends upon explicit confession of Christ' (p. 4), it is his own exegesis of this text which in fact isolates it from its canonical context and so places inappropriate restrictions upon its meaning. It is certainly true that Jesus' words in John 14 do speak to the immediate situation of the disciples, but they do so by expressing a truth about God which transcends the immediate situation. This explains why both the

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positive ('I am the way' etc.) and the negative ('no one comes to the Father except through me') are necessary. The truth about God expressed in John 14:6 is both a comfort and a challenge as the following verses, and other parallel passages within the canon, demonstrate. Similarly, Romans 1:26–27 expresses truth about God's intention for human sexuality that both fits neatly within the argument from 1:18 to 3:20 but also holds true beyond that original situation and is easily co-ordinated with other biblical passages on this theme where the rhetorical purpose is demonstrably different.

- iii. The Archbishop also confuses the concept of an argument and that of a conclusion. Putting it simply, the conclusion is the endpoint of an argument but there may be a number of steps along the way (premises, evidence, inferences from evidence, etc.) and each of these needs to be taken seriously. Indeed, the conclusion almost invariably relies upon each one of those steps if it is to be considered valid and/or persuasive. Failure to appreciate this amounts to the fundamental flaw in his method of biblical interpretation and seriously distorts his treatment of the texts he cites as his principal illustrations. In the case of Romans 1 in particular, the ultimate conclusion that all stand in need of the atoning work of Christ relies upon *both* an affirmation of evil behaviour stemming from a suppression of the truth on the part of the nations *and* the very same behaviour and attitude demonstrated by those who with the Torah in their hands look down in judgement upon the nations. Romans 2 is certainly a critical part of the argument leading to the conclusion of Romans 3:20, but it is not the only part of the argument and in fact relies for much of its force on the real depravity of the activities described in Romans 1. Each step of the argument needs to be taken seriously in order properly to understand the conclusion.
- iv. In addition, a number of Williams' helpful affirmations are compromised by their attachment to questionable negations. For example, while the communicative act of Scripture certainly involves a summons to assemble together as a certain sort of community, to suggest that this involves a denial of its informative function or a downplaying of (presumably ethical) instruction is unwarranted (p. 2). God addresses his people in these words, not simply to constitute a community or transform its corporate behaviour (though this certainly must not be denied), but also to make himself known, declare what he has done and will do, and train the believer in a life characterised by a faithful response to grace.
- v. The Archbishop fails to do justice to the fact that we read the Bible *both* as a community *and* as individuals within that community. On the one hand, there is clear warrant within the

Bible itself for personal and individual reading of the Scriptures (e.g. Joshua and Timothy). On the other, it is indisputable that the teaching of Scripture is meant to generate and sustain the believing community gathered around the word of the one who died and was raised for them. However, these two basic contexts for reading need to be co-ordinated rather than opposed to one another. In the light of such a principle, individualism in Bible reading (neglecting the truth that we read with the communion of saints) needs to be challenged every bit as much as an exclusively ecclesial reading (which minimises the challenge to the individual to be transformed in thinking and behaviour according to the revealed mind of God). In short, 2 Timothy 3:15–17 presents a more embracing view of Scripture's purpose or utility than Williams' lecture suggests.

- vi. Unfortunately, Archbishop Williams does not treat fairly those with whom he disagrees. He does not explore the basis for their arguments or attempt to understand them on their own terms. He caricatures the way conservative theologians have dealt with John 14:6 and Romans 1:26–27, labelling their exegesis as 'theologically inept or rootless'. Yet who actually claims that the question being asked in John 14 is first and foremost that of the fate of non-Christians? Who isolates this text from Jesus' teaching about his person and work? Who denies that Romans 1:26–27 is part of an integrated argument stretching at least from 1:18 through to 3:20 and concluding that the Law holds all accountable before God and in need of the grace made available in Jesus? Responsible exegetes have always made these connections while at the same time pointing out the significance of each individual part of the argument. Williams makes no attempt to understand the deep theological roots that underlie the interpretations with which he disagrees. He dismisses them with vague generalisations (see above 2a and 2e) which beg a series of questions. As a result it is hard to avoid the conclusion he has constructed mere straw men.
- vii. On the other hand, theological assumptions that would be questioned by many are smuggled into his own lecture at various points. He maintains that none would deny that Scripture is 'finally normative in some sense' (p. 1) but this leaves a great deal of room to move. 'In some sense' is extraordinarily vague. His suggestion that 'the Word of God that acts in the Bible is a Word directed towards those changes that bring about the Eucharistic community' (p. 10) raises a range of questions about the character of Scripture as the Word of God as well as the nature of the community of disciples. Williams' choice to use the expression 'same-sex relationships' in his discussion of Romans 1:26–27 may be mere contemporary euphemism (p. 5), but it obscures the text's concentration on homosexual *acts* in much the same way as this concentration

has been obscured in the wider contemporary debate. Similarly, he blurs the particular nature and significance of homosexual activity by applying the word 'unnatural', an expression which in this passage Paul uses only in connection with this specific manifestation of our rebellion, to the other sins the apostle highlights in the next stage of his argument, Romans 1:28–32 (p. 5).

- viii. Overall Archbishop Williams' treatment of how we ought to read Scripture complicates rather than clarifies the process. We are involved in 'an act of enabling communication' (p. 3) and there is little sense that speaking and hearing, and even writing and reading, are God-given abilities which are subject to very little theorising in Scripture itself. In Williams' account the historical location of the text and its literary character throw up obstacles which must be overcome rather than provide us with additional resources to help us avoid wilful or unintentional misreading. He appears to have little place for the Protestant doctrine of the clarity of Scripture or the more basic theological affirmation that God wishes to make himself and his purposes known to his creatures and that he is more than capable of doing just that. Indeed, the Archbishop's well-known appreciation of apophatic theology shows itself in his claim that 'popular appeals to the obvious leave us battling in the dark' (p. 1).

5. The Two Texts

A less selective reading of the context of the two texts Williams cites in his lecture, one which takes into account not only the whole of the immediate context but also the context in the Gospel or letter in which the text appears and ultimately the biblical canon itself, assists an exegesis which affirms many of the positive points that he makes without succumbing to an arbitrary dismissal of the details of the text.

(a) *John 14:6*

Jesus' answer to Thomas' question, 'I am the way, and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me' does indeed need to be understood as part of the farewell discourse which properly begins in the previous chapter. John's account of the Passover meal Jesus shared with his disciples before his arrest begins an extended explanation of what is about to happen. Jesus is giving his disciples the categories with which to understand his coming death and resurrection. Here is not only comfort for the hours ahead but a perspective for life with faith and hope during the many days and years that will follow. Furthermore, Jesus' words in this verse have an even larger context: they constitute the penultimate in a series of 'I am' statements throughout John's Gospel which progressively unfold critical aspects of his identity and his mission (6:35; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). Thomas' despairing uncertainty about the way ahead is met by Jesus' insistence not only that he is *the way*

and the truth and the life (and following the other such sayings in this Gospel the article is hardly incidental or conventional) but that there is no other access to the Father. The comfort Jesus gives to the disciples is not only 'the mutual love that he has made possible' (though this should not be underplayed, especially in the light of the footwashing incident which begins the 'movement' of these chapters) but rather that in him they have what is available nowhere else — access to the Father who sent him.

In the verses which follow (as much part of the context as those which go before), as Jesus answers the next question of the disciples, he provides them with the basis for the extraordinary claim of 14:6. Not only is Jesus the only way to the Father, all other ways must necessarily be blocked because of the unique relationship between Jesus and the Father. The eternal bond between the Father and the Son in the Spirit undergirds Jesus' words in this verse. The Gospel prologue is echoed here: 'No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known' (1:18). Since Jesus is who he is now revealed to be, there can be no other way to the Father.

Here too is the same exclusive orientation to Jesus (note not 'the Christian institution or the Christian system') that is found in the earliest preaching of Acts (e.g. Acts 4:8–12) and in the Pauline epistles (e.g. Eph. 1:3–14; Phil. 2:5–11; 1 Tim. 2:5–6). For this reason the New Testament and Christians through the centuries have insisted that the search for alternatives or complements is not only idolatrous but demonic (e.g. 1 Cor. 10:14–22). Within this same discourse in John's Gospel Jesus will speak of the world as the arena of opposition to him and his word, an opposition which can be characterised as hatred and which is ultimately sourced in the failure of those in the world to 'know him who sent me' (15:21). God is truly known and served as God himself determines and the sending of the Son into the world must settle the matter. This is why Jesus himself will pray, immediately after this discourse of John 13–16 is over, 'And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (17:3).

(b) Romans 1:26–27

The mention in Romans 1:26–27 of relations 'contrary to nature', spelt out in terms of 'men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error', is part of Paul's argument towards the universal sinfulness of humanity which stretches from 1:18 to 3:20. This is itself the preliminary to his presentation of the glorious alternative to 'the wrath of God' (1:18), namely 'the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith' (3:24–25). When this broader context is taken into account, it becomes clear that the change envisaged by the argument of which this text is a part is not so much

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'from confidence in having received divine revelation to an awareness of universal sinfulness and need' as 'from standing under the wrath of God to receiving the entirely unmerited grace of God in Christ'.

The role of these particular verses in the wider argument is to provide part of the downwards spiral of human sinfulness. The refusal to acknowledge God or the truth he has revealed, indeed the decision in one way or another to suppress this knowledge, has given way to futile thinking and ludicrous idolatry, to the dishonouring of our bodies in sexual activity contrary to the intention of God expressed in our created nature, and the abuse of each other. What is more, this perverse and tragic situation is not simply observable in the world outside the covenant people of God. Possession of the Law has not ensured that Israel is any better than the nations in hearing and heeding the express will of God. The Jew and the Gentile stand alike condemned. The whole world is held accountable to God and the only hope, for the Jew as much as the Gentile, is what God has done in Jesus. Romans 2 does not diminish the seriousness of what is said in Romans 1. Instead Romans 3 makes clear that Romans 1 and Romans 2 need to be taken with equal seriousness. The rejection of God has corrupted us all at every level and no one can afford a censorious attitude. All attempts to stand over others in judgement are exposed as blind and damnable hypocrisy.

The explicit identification of homosexual activity as a particular instance of this downward spiral is not out of place, either here in Romans or elsewhere in the New Testament (and indeed the entire Bible). The Old Testament background to this epistle (and the extensive appeal to the Old Testament throughout Romans has long been noted) reveals that this kind of activity had been roundly condemned long before it had become fashionable in the baths of Rome. Here, at a very profound level, God's intention for the human race is cast aside. Paul almost labours the point with his identification of this behaviour as an exchange of 'natural relations' for 'those that are contrary to nature'. The sexual polarity of the race was highlighted in the creation accounts of Genesis (e.g. Gen. 1:27). In this light Paul is making clear that the cycle of depravity is not something abstract, it does not occur simply at the level of ideas and knowledge, nor is it only a matter of false religious orientation. The very constitution of the race is challenged and perverted by those who refuse to acknowledge God and respond to his wonderful provision of creation with gratitude. With such disregard for ourselves as God has made us, it is no wonder that the next step in the argument exposes the abuse of our neighbour. Homosexual activity may not be singled out as the most serious of all sins. Nevertheless, it represents a very particular type of sin which seeks to overturn our own created human nature. It is therefore not surprising that it features regularly in the New Testament as one of those things on account of which 'the wrath of God is coming' (1 Cor. 6:9–10; Eph. 5:3–6; Col. 3:5–6; 1 Tim. 1:8–11).

Yet Romans 2 must be heard as well. As genuinely perverse as such behaviour is, none of us may pretend that we are outside the circle of sinfulness and guilt and so free to condemn others in a censorious fashion. We need to recognise that depravity is our problem as well as theirs (whoever the 'others' might be). Apart from the work of Christ, all stand condemned before God. We have no righteousness of our own to plead and the Law of God only exposes just how perverse we really are. The sinful behaviour in Romans 1 is not somehow excused or revealed to be other than it is, but neither is the world divided into those who are on their own terms either wicked or righteous. That distinction has been overthrown by our common guilt before God and his perfect will. In such a context the gospel comes as wonderful news to all men and women, no matter their background, no matter what their sin: 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ...' (3:24)

6. Conclusion

Careful hermeneutical reflection can be helpful in enabling us to be disciplined and more self-aware as we seek to 'rightly handle the word of truth' (2 Tim. 2:15). Unfortunately, Archbishop Williams has not provided us with this kind of reflection. His call to give due attention to what each text is in fact teaching in its context is certainly welcome. It is indeed possible to use parts of the Bible in ways contrary to their intention or which do violence to their context. But sadly the archbishop has not heeded his own call! It is vital that the teaching of each text arises from that text in its context; yet each text must be given its due weight within that context and ultimately within the teaching of the Bible as a whole.

Williams' lecture is unpersuasive not only because he caricatures the exegetical conclusions of others as 'theologically inept or rootless accounts of Scripture' (p. 1) but because he develops his own exposition using methodological principles that are both significantly flawed and selectively applied. The end result is that critical elements of the teaching of those texts he cites as examples are silenced by a misreading of their contexts. In fact, his own readings of John 14 and Romans 1 are more fragmentary than many of those which he rejects. Ironically, he insists that his proposals are not put forward to settle controversy or change substantive interpretations but simply to show that 'many current ways of reading miss the actual direction of the passage and so undermine a proper theological approach to Scripture' (p. 5). Yet this is precisely what his own way of reading does. In other words, Williams' practice does not live up to his theory.

But the theory is not without its problems either. Whilst Williams' desire to arrive at a new synthesis which transcends both popular biblicism and traditional liberalism sounds promising, what this synthesis is is never fully explained. His argument appears to be driven by

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philosophical and ecclesiological agendas which remain largely hidden. And so, having promised guidance towards a more sophisticated and theological reading of the Scriptures, his lecture fails to deliver, serving only to obscure rather than clarify the process of faithfully reading the Bible today.

For and on behalf of the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission

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