

FAITH AND ORDER COMMISSION

Diversity, Difference, Serious Disagreement and the Life of the Church

Supporting Paper 1, 'Communion, Disagreement and Conscience,' Loveday Alexander and Joshua Hordern

The second chapter of the FAOC report *Communion and Disagreement* discussed conscience alongside conflict, consultation and conciliarity with regard to how communion is sustained in the church in the face of serious disagreements. The goal of this supporting paper is to develop that section (§14-42) in order to illumine more fully the significance of conscience for thinking about difference and disagreement in the life of the church, taking Paul's letters as a starting point. We note from the outset that the language of 'conscience' is not straightforward even where it does occur explicitly in Paul. Sometimes the relevant word (*syneidesis*) or operative concept may be better rendered as 'consciousness' or 'self-consciousness'. Our approach is first to state what we agree about (§1-14) and then to engage in conversation together concerning matters about which we at present disagree (§15-40). A concluding note (§41-43) states our hope of agreement in the future.

Listening to Scripture

1. What happens when Christians cannot agree over the definition of what is sinful? This is the case in 1 Corinthians 8-10, where Paul discusses 'food offered to idols.' The principle was clear: becoming a Christian meant turning away from "dumb idols" to serve the one living and true God (1 Cor 12.2). But in practice it was not always clear where "idolatry" began. Meat bought in the market-place (1 Cor 10.25) might have been slaughtered as part of a pagan religious ceremony: should a Christian eat such meat? Dinner-parties were often held in temple dining-rooms (1 Cor 8.10): should a Christian accept such invitations?¹
2. 1 Corinthians 8.4-6 outlines one approach which we may call the 'strong' position (though Paul does not use this term). There is only one God. Therefore "idols" – i.e. pagan gods – do not exist. Therefore they cannot spoil perfectly good food created by God. Paul implicitly approves of this approach, making it the basis for allowing Christians to eat market-place meat (1 Cor 10.25; cf. also Rom 14.14; 1 Tim 4.3-5).
3. But there is also a "weaker" position (1 Cor. 8.11) which cannot escape the sense that pagan gods exist, and therefore that Christian cannot participate even in apparently harmless social activities without compromise (1 Cor 8.7-10). To such

¹ This concern is still a live issue for many non-western Christians. See Derek Newton, *Deity and Diet* (Sheffield: JSOT 1991). Some regarded the issue as purely 'cultural' and took a 'strong' philosophical position that rendered the ban irrelevant to Christians: reading between the lines, this seems to be Paul's own position (1 Cor 8.4-6, 10.25-26).

a person, eating meat which might have come from a pagan sacrifice (or attending a social event in a temple) will always *feel* wrong, however strong the arguments made to the contrary: and this can only have the effect of de-sensitizing the conscience (1 Cor 8.10) so that it becomes less adequate to its role in discipleship and the life of the church. Just how feeling, moral reasoning and conscience relate to each other is then an important question.

4. Paul does not attempt to arbitrate between these two views by insisting on the right answer, knowing that the right answer is not the whole story (1 Cor 8.2). His concern is not primarily which view is right but how to care for all members of the community: “knowledge” which has a catastrophic effect on the faith of a fellow-Christian (1 Cor 8.9-13) cannot “build up” the church. Christian action, therefore, must not display an attitude to knowledge which puffs one part of the body up while diminishing or destroying others but a love for the church. Knowledge known in the wisdom of love and carefully, even selectively, deployed, may build up the body (1 Cor 8.1-3).
5. The implications emerge in 1 Corinthians 10. Membership in Christ’s body brings the Christian into partnership with others who share in the same Bread and Cup (1 Cor 10.17). Such partnership necessitates the interplay of responsibilities with freedoms (1 Cor 10.23-24). The ‘strong’ position is perfectly correct in itself: meat from the market can be accepted as a gift from God (1 Cor 10.25-26), and social invitations from unbelievers should not be subjected to unnecessary inquisition (1 Cor 10.27). But if somebody else – the host, or a ‘weaker’ church member – raises the question of idolatry, the issue should be treated with all due seriousness. Responsibility to the other’s spiritual needs takes precedence over our own spiritual liberty (1 Cor 10.28-32).
6. Paul returns to the issue in Romans 14.1-15, this time writing to a church – or group of churches – that he had not founded. Clearly the early church contained a diversity of viewpoints on the matter. Here the ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ views encompass not only food laws (should Christians eat only vegetables – presumably as a way of avoiding idol-meats?) but also whether any particular time is to be considered sacred (should Christians esteem some days as better than others, or should they treat all days alike?).
7. We should not underestimate the seriousness of these issues: for Paul, they may impinge on the heart of the gospel of freedom in Christ. The plea in Colossians 2.16 ‘Let no-one pass judgement on you in questions of food or drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath...let no-one disqualify you’ recalls the equally impassioned cry of Galatians 5.1: ‘For freedom Christ has set us free: stand fast then, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.’
8. There are two steps in the argument in Galatians. On the one hand, ‘In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love’ — which would seem to imply that the issues are *adiaphora* (cf. the *canon* of Gal 6.15: comp. Rom 14.17). But on the other hand, Paul insists that those who allow themselves to be browbeaten into justifying themselves by conformity to law are ‘severed from Christ’ (Gal. 5.4) and that ‘this persuasion is not from him who calls you’ (Gal 5.8: cf. Col 2.18-19). Paul’s goal is to persuade the Galatians to embrace freedom in Christ.

9. In contrast to Paul's insistence in Galatians on turning away from their false persuasion, in Romans 14 *both* sides in a difference are enjoined to refrain from judgement: 'Let not those who eat despise those who abstain, and let not those who abstain pass judgement on those who eat: for God has welcomed them' (Rom 14.3). The key to understanding both passages lies in the 'triangular' model of *diakonia* set out in Rom 14.4: 'Who are you to pass judgement on another's servant? It is before their own master that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the master is able to make them stand' (cf. Rom 14.10-12).² As long as the eating of food or keeping of a day is undertaken 'in honour of the Lord' and with the intention of giving thanks to God, it will be accepted as authentic service by the Lord (Rom 14.6): the essential is 'Let everyone be fully convinced in their own mind' (Rom 14.5), albeit on a matter which that Paul has explicitly indicated that he thinks is indifferent in itself (Rom 14.14).
10. But the demands of membership in the Body go beyond refraining from judgement. 'Walking in love' (Rom 14.15) means deciding 'never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother or sister' (Rom 14.13): 'If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil.' How? Because what you (correctly) perceive as 'clean' may yet be a stumbling-block to another Christian who has doubts, 'because they do not act from faith' (Rom 14.23). Thus there is an obligation on the 'strong' to 'bear with the failings of the weak,' to please (and work for the edification of) our neighbour rather than ourselves (Rom 15.1-2). This is what it means to 'pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding' (Rom 14.19): that is, (following the example of Christ) 'to live in harmony with one another' to the praise of God (Rom 15.5-6).

Conscience: Points of Agreement

11. Romans 14 raises, in acute fashion, the question of conscience (*syneidesis*) — though the word occurs only in 1 Cor 8-10.³ There are three points regarding conscience on which we happily agree.
12. First, most importantly, we agree that conscience, though always individual, has corporate or ecclesial significance. We are called to 'be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.' (Philippians 2.2) The *koinonia*, the fellowship of sharing in Christ, is characterised both by common passion for Christ and, as an inevitable consequence of sin, by passionate disagreement about the nature of Christ's gospel and its implications. Christians' consciences will be affected in some way by this passionate interchange. In the exegesis above, the weaker member's sensitive conscience (Rom 14.15) is in danger of being wounded by the actions of the stronger. The 'conscience' is not simply an individual affair — though it *is* individual (cf. esp. 1 Cor 10.29); it has profound corporate significance. For an endangered conscience for one member

² This 'triangular' view also underlies Paul's argument about himself and Apollos in 1 Cor 3-4: cf. esp. 3.5; 4.1-5. For the 'triangular' shape of this argument, compare the FAOC report on Senior Church Leadership §§52–68: Alexander and Higton [2016, 25-27].

³ I Corinthians 8.7, 10, 12; 10.25, 27, 28, 29.

brings danger to the whole body. The danger might involve either a wounded or a seared conscience, the former tending to despair, the latter to a kind of indifference or brazenness. What is striking is that Paul does not attempt to impose his view, rooted in sound doctrine, on those whose conscience is 'weak'. As regards the things upon which difference of opinion is permissible, even if one opinion rests on a mistake (i.e. that it is wrong to eat meat sacrificed to 'idols'), Paul does not recommend nor does he engage in moral or doctrinal persuasion of the mistaken weaker brother who is in danger of being troubled. Instead his advice avoids endangering the individual by wounding their conscience. Because he values the peaceful conscience of weaker members so highly, Paul does not call the churches to argue the 'weak' into the 'strong' position.

13. Second, we agree that it is entirely proper to consider the subjective experience of conscience. What makes the passages from Paul so interesting is that the problem which Paul recognises is an *existential, subjective* one: we are created to be *subjects*; our experiences of the world and of dangers to our self-understanding are matters of creaturely and ecclesial *existence*. This self-understanding involves recognising ourselves truthfully among the goods of God's world and learning to act towards those goods rightly.
14. Third, we agree that the wounding or paining of the conscience is a very serious matter requiring careful pastoral attention. Shared passion can lead to deep wounding. Those whose conscience becomes marred in some way which is incompatible with the freedom of Christ suffer catastrophic effects. Those who have pastoral care for the church are therefore called to bear tenderly the consciences of many in their own hearts.

We turn now to consider in discussion points on which we do not yet agree.

Conscience and Persuasion in Paul - Joshua Hordern

15. What is the proper relationship between 'conscience' and 'persuasion' for Christians? Any link between them must bear in mind Paul's decision not to persuade the weak in Corinth to accept the implicitly approved doctrine of the strong. But it must also take into account Paul's much firmer attitude to other matters such as the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church, embodied in the table fellowship dispute (e.g. Acts 10-15, Galatians 1-2 esp. 2.11-14). Paul's pastoral approach on that matter is rebuke and open conflict aimed at doctrinal and moral persuasion and reconciliation. Paul tells the troubled Galatians that the 'persuasion' they had come to accept was not from the God who called them (Galatians 5.8). He vigorously opposes those who lead the Galatians away from the liberty found in Christ.
16. Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 -10 focus on disagreements based on beliefs about food which, though mistaken, were of real significance for those who held them. However, that Paul did not press his disagreement with the 'weak', having a care for their conscience, in no way suggests a more general toleration of deep disagreement in the church. Instead Paul's wisdom in selecting *which* matters to press should focus Christian minds today on discerning the issues on which disagreement must not permanently characterise the church. Such issues have to be resolved if the church's members are to share a common life. Christians

should not rest with such disagreement even in order to avoid paining other Christians' consciences. Instead, resolution to such matters should be sought through doctrinal and moral discussion and persuasion in order that all may come to the persuasion of the gospel. The Christian conscience is threatened by the kind of (bad) disagreement which ought not to characterise the church, i.e. a disagreement about matters on which one ought to endeavour resolution. Such bad disagreement will cauterise or 'sear' the conscience.

Consciences wounded and seared

17. As noted, *syneidesis* (normally 'conscience') can often be better translated 'consciousness' or 'self-consciousness'. A person's self-consciousness can be 'wounded' by being grieved or offended, or feeling guilty after doing something that one was never quite convinced about. Wounding may lead a person to destruction (1 Cor. 8.11), which seems to mean a downwards spiral into despair as the 'weak brother', slipping into what he believes to be sin, fears that he has passed out of the freedom of God's grace and back into the slavery of idolatry.
18. Another route to destruction is that the conscience becomes 'seared' by being wrongly self-confident that one's actions and teaching are in keeping with what is good, right and true (1 Timothy 4.1-4). If the 'weak' concludes from observing the 'strong' eat, not that the demons 'are nothing', but that they may be worshipped as valid manifestations of the dark side of God, then his or her eating, however cheerful and untroubled, will not have the innocence of the 'strong'. The conscience will have become seared and indifferent, entrenched in false belief.
19. Disagreement is especially bad when it involves or engenders such seared indifference. For such a consciousness fails to 'have a (bad) conscience' about sin. This corruption of conscience diminishes the possibility that the gospel's persuasive power will resolve disagreements. It brings about impenitent slumber not lively repentance.

Liberty of conscience

20. The phrase 'liberty of conscience' is prone to abuse here. For 'liberty' might be taken to mean the freedom not to be troubled in one's conscience by the moral and doctrinal persuasion of the gospel proclaimed and lived by other Christians. In this 'freedom', an appeal to 'conscience' becomes the defiantly raised hand which signals 'speak no further, you will not persuade me'. This diminishes hope of reconciliation in shared belief and practice, leaving no longer liberty but slavery. Instead, 'liberty of conscience' must first and last mean the freedom won for the conscience from condemnation by the salvation achieved through him who loved us and gave himself for us (Galatians 2.20).
21. Christians are called to bear tenderly the consciences of other Christians in their own hearts, including those with whom they disagree. The danger of seared indifference to others' consciences is real. But if bad disagreement leads to such indifference, a church's good disagreement must aim at a shared judgement about its common life. That judgment is that, if we all together share a particular belief and practice, it will not undermine anyone's experience of liberty of

conscience, the consciousness that he or she has been reckoned innocent by the justifying judgment of God in Christ.

22. If such shared judgment is not possible, the results are very serious. Even on matters implicitly reckoned indifferent, Paul warns that the mistaken 'weak' Christian is at risk of being destroyed by the actions of the 'strong' if led into what appears sinful to the weak. The risk of such 'destruction' means that care for Christians' consciences must be central to how the church disagrees.

Guilt in the conscience

23. Historically, belief in the prospective or directive function of conscience emerged in the Church Fathers although it was in scholastic authors that this notion became systematic.⁴ Martin Luther, by contrast, understood the retrospective notion basic to Paul's thought: that conscience is a judgment on the whole person, seen in light of sin, Christ and the gospel. In this way, he grasped how the guilty conscience could be destructive if an individual perceives themselves to have so believed and acted as to become separated from God's mercy. The conscience's judgment condemns but, when associated again with the mercy and grace of God, recognises freedom from condemnation.
24. For this reason, the conscience is properly called 'subjective'. Affections (or 'emotions') are central to the Christian's subjective experience of gospel freedom – the movement from condemnation and fear to absolution and joy. The conscience's affections, whether joyful or fearful, are important for a person's self-consciousness. A self-understanding continually shaped by guilt and fear is not experiencing the freedom of the gospel of Christ in whom there is no condemnation and no enduring subjective experience of guilt.⁵

Pastoral care

25. But temporary experiences of guilt and pained consciences do have a role in the church's life. In pastoral care, we should make every effort to avoid bringing about false and unnecessary guilt – the guilt of the unconvinced weaker brother who eats while perceiving idols to be gods (though they are in fact no gods at all). However, if one is emboldened to think that a fellow Christian's conscience has become seared and resistant to the Spirit's convicting work, one approaches very

⁴ It is not clear what a 'vocation to follow conscience' (Church of England, *Grace and Disagreement*, p.18.) might mean in terms of Paul's thought or whether this is a helpful usage for the church at all. As to whether 'conscience' is to be construed as a judgment which directs prospectively or a judgment which examines retrospectively, there is ample support for the former in the long and rather messy tradition of the church but little or no support from Pauline usage. In short, if the idea of 'a vocation to follow conscience' is that 'conscience' has a directive role, then it is one quite foreign to the New Testament, especially to Pauline thought. Cf. C.A. Pierce. *Conscience in the New Testament* (SCM, 1955) – Paul 'is definite that conscience only comes into play after at least the initiation of a wrong act; when it does not come into play, it may mean that the act committed is not wrong, but equally it may mean that the reactions are defective – either handicapped by wrong information, wrong environment or wrong habit, or made sluggish by sin, repeated and unrepented.' (p.109) For a brief summary of the tradition, see Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Eerdmans, 2005), 303-308.

⁵ For this claim in more detail, see Joshua Hordern, *Political Affections: Civic Participation and Moral Theology* (OUP, 2013), chapter 2; see also Joshua Hordern, 'Loyalty, Conscience and Tense Communion: Jonathan Edwards meets Martha Nussbaum', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 27.2 (May 2014), 167-184.

difficult territory to be entered only in continuous prayer. The responsible way to pray, pastor, teach and act that a fellow Christian might become aware of sin and repent is to hope in the convicting and redemptive work of the Spirit whereby sin can be first illumined then swiftly forgiven and guilt first heightened then speedily assuaged.

26. Again pastorally, the church must grasp how some believers' liberty of conscience in Christ is threatened by the beliefs and practices of other members. Understanding the type of disagreement which different parties believe is taking place is crucial, as explained in the main report. If some Christians perceive that certain beliefs and practices will incur guilt and even, through a progressive searing of the conscience, place at risk their communion with Christ, this is very serious. Those with pastoral responsibility must prayerfully discern the tender (or not so tender) state of others' consciences. For those indifferent or cauterised, one may, through prayer, action and teaching, cooperate in hope with the Spirit's work in heightening pain in the conscience; for those slipping into despair, the relieving of the conscience by the gospel is needed.

The responsibility to teach

27. To these pastoral ends, the church has the difficult responsibility to teach doctrine, including moral doctrine. This responsibility to teach what it is good, right and true precisely illumines what one ought to 'have a (bad) conscience' about. Paul understood that there was no need to have a bad conscience about food sacrificed to idols. But he offers no similar reassurance concerning that which is clearly sinful, explicitly highlighting sexual sins as being of a different order than matters regarding food (1 Corinthians 6.18-20). Good pastor-teachers will know that having a bad conscience must never be the end of the road. Such conscience ought to be relieved through the promise of God's forgiveness, restoring people to the freedom of the gospel and the joy of repentance.
28. Accordingly, Christians ought to hope, pray, speak and practice that siblings in Christ may come, by the Spirit, to 'have a conscience' about their belief-and-practice on matters they do not judge are *adiaphora*. This is the corollary of avoiding causing pain in the conscience for siblings in Christ over matters they do believe are *adiaphora*. The conscience is *for* something – *for* awakening to a sense that, were one to believe and practice in this way, one would be in danger of renouncing faith in Christ and taking a road to destruction, paved with despair or indifference or even both.

Conclusion

29. In summary, what may be learned from the conscience passages in Romans and 1 Corinthians is not so much a model for dealing with the kind of disagreements about sexual ethics which are particularly pressing at the moment. Few, if any, would willingly see themselves as the 'weak' in these debates, labouring under some misapprehension of the truth. Few would see these debates as ones which do not require resolution in the present life of the church. Rather, these passages press Christians to recognise the seriousness of the conscience's ministry within us and therefore the need for tenderness in the continually prayerful, Spirit-dependent process of moral and doctrinal persuasion, whether in personal

pastoral care, the discussions within and between provinces of the Anglican Communion or ecumenical conversation.

30. For when Paul says, 'this persuasion is not from him who calls you' (Gal 5.8), we understand that it is possible to be persuaded one way or another. The gospel's persuasion brings total relief to the conscience through justification by faith in Christ. Faith has a content which may be denied. If it seems to the believer that they are denying it by acknowledging gods in addition to Christ, then this is – for that believer – a denial of faith. Inasmuch as a clear conscience depends on faith, it is a catastrophe for the conscience. Those who claimed to be Christians but seem to that believer to deny Christ by going to the temples or eating the idol food threaten that believer's faith, tempting him or her back to the dark paths of sin. It is the church's calling to avert such disasters.
31. But it is also the church's calling to avoid a failure to feel guilt where repentance is needed, on account of a failure to relate oneself properly to that which is good, right and true. Sensitivity to the former kind of disaster must not, for Christ's sake, perversely induce a searing of the conscience among teachers of the church so that they lack the Spirit's boldness in persuading the faithful of the truth of the gospel and guiding the church in Christ's way of salvation.

Further reflections – Loveday Alexander

32. This is enormously helpful, and I am grateful to Joshua for this clear and lucid analysis of the role of conscience. What this brings out is what is referred to in the main report as the moral and spiritual qualities required to deal with disagreement in the life of the church - a particular kind of attentiveness that needs to be sustained, and indeed is actually rather difficult to sustain, in order to disagree in communion with one another in Christ. I think you bring out very well the delicacy of the pastoral task and the moral and spiritual qualities required of all concerned.
33. Of course no amount of exegesis will resolve our problem as to which issues are *adiaphora* today. That has to be argued on other grounds (which are not the subject of this paper). But I would strongly resist the underlying implication that the ethics of food are intrinsically 'of a different order from' the ethics of sexuality (§27). For Paul and his correspondents, the idol-foods issue is fundamentally about *idolatry*, and touches on profound issues of Christian identity in a pagan world. There are real spiritual issues at stake here — as Paul admits in 1 Cor 10. This makes it all the more remarkable that Romans 14 allows that *both* sides in the debate may be acting with integrity and as an act of Christian obedience, and as such should treat each other with respect.
34. And it is worth remarking that the dispute in Galatians ch.2 (which Paul regarded so seriously that he 'rebuked Peter to his face') was also about *food* issues: the issue of table-fellowship between Jewish and Gentile members of the church in Antioch. And the reason Paul seems to have reacted so strongly on this occasion was precisely because food goes to the heart of Christian fellowship: the real danger was the breaking of Christian fellowship. In other words, an ethical dispute which leads to the breaking of Christian table-fellowship cannot be tolerated within the Body of Christ, not because it doesn't matter but because

unity in Christ matters *more*. Paul eventually extends this principle to all the great issues that divided Paul's world: race, gender, slavery (Gal 3.28): it is not only the Jew-Gentile division that is transcended 'in Christ'.

35. I agree that Paul's treatment of sexual ethics does not allow much room for 'good disagreement' (though he does allow some space for disagreement (or human judgement) on sexual issues — cf. the treatment of divorce in 1 Cor 7). But this is precisely the problem for those Christians whose ethical 'conscience' (or 'consciousness') will not allow them to accept uncritically the first-century cultural assumptions that underlie Paul's construction of sexuality. This is one example — though not the only one — of a situation where Christian ethical thinking is informed not only by scripture but by a wider repertoire of moral reasoning, extrapolating from Christian principles rather than citing explicit biblical regulations (Aquinas' 'just war' theory might provide another example). The discussion on Hooker (in supporting paper 3, pp.29-45) is relevant here.
36. Thus Joshua's point about the seriousness of conscience's ministry is entirely apposite to the question. However, we must be aware that the argument from 'conscience' can be used by both sides. For some, conscience may inhere in scrupulous adherence to biblical precepts, and it is this kind of conscience (what Paul calls the 'weak' conscience) that can easily be damaged by the arguments of the 'strong' which appear to sit light to scriptural precepts. I suspect this is how Paul uses the term in 1 Corinthians. But for others, conscience may equally come into play where scriptural precepts conflict with deeply-held moral norms which are themselves derived from and congruent with fundamental principles of Christian behaviour. Here again the teaching of Romans 14 (that *both* sides in such a dispute can claim with integrity to be honouring the same master) is highly pertinent to the question of how we deal with difference and disagreement within the Body of Christ.
37. What Paul sets out in Romans 14 is not a programme of moral re-education for the errant brother or sister (as we agreed above in §12), but mutual acceptance of the 'in-Christ-ness' of the brother or sister with whom we do *not* agree. In other words, he can envisage a communion (*koinonia*) in Christ in which the shared foundational awareness that we are both 'in Christ' transcends differences in belief and practice. The crucial thing is to hold on to the fact that the brother or sister with whom I disagree (and with whom I may be engaging in robust debate on the point at issue) also shares 'the consciousness that he or she has been reckoned innocent by the justifying judgment of God in Christ' — and that I have no more right to cast doubt on this fundamental awareness (or to seek to undermine it) than he or she has to cast doubt on or undermine mine.
38. This is not to envisage a fellowship without *any* form of shared belief and practice. Irenaeus' 'canonic principle' (supporting paper 2, pp.19-28) is relevant here. The canon allows for diversity within boundaries; it is neither a recipe for infinite and unregulated diversity, nor for a monolithic unity. Irenaeus recognises the need for the 'rule of faith,' the *regula fidei*, to guide the church in the

interpretation of Scripture: the ‘overarching story’ (itself derived from Scripture) by which the scriptures need to be read and interpreted.⁶

39. This refusal to over-define has been the traditional practice of the Church of England. Luke Timothy Johnson suggests that there are two equal and opposite dangers in attempting to define the faith: defining *too little*, and defining *too much*.⁷ The former displays an ‘exaggerated and distorted commitment to individual liberty at the expense of communal integrity’.⁸ The latter, however, is equally dangerous: such groups ‘tend to confuse the accidental with the essential. They tend to make some single element of belief or of morals the litmus test of membership and indeed of true Christianity’.⁹
40. We can see this mirrored in the controversies of the Reformation. The Church of England was under constant pressure from the Puritans to offer a fuller definition of its faith along the lines of the Westminster Confession. But (as Bishop Pearson argued successfully in his 1660 pamphlet *No Necessity of Reformation of the Publick Doctrine of the Church of England*), there is wisdom in the restraint of the Thirty-Nine Articles. And in retaining the Creeds (not the Articles) as its standard of Christian faith, the Church of England recognized the importance of the ‘reticence’ of the Creeds, in refusing to define any more than is absolutely necessary: what Johnson calls ‘the blessed simplicity of profession’.

Conclusion

41. C.S. Lewis’ Uncle Screwtape writes: ‘We have quite removed from men’s minds what that pestilent fellow Paul used to teach about food and other unessentials—namely, that the human without scruples should always give in to the human with scruples. You would think they could not fail to see the application. You would expect to find the “low” churchman genuflecting and crossing himself lest the weak conscience of his “high” brother should be moved to irreverence, and the “high” one refraining from these exercises lest he should betray his “low” brother into idolatry. And so it would have been but for our ceaseless labour. Without that the variety of usage within the Church of England might have become a positive hotbed of charity and humility’.¹⁰
42. It is appropriate to conclude by emphasising the eschatological dimension of knowledge (1 Cor 13.8-13). Neither of us is advocating that we should rest content with disagreement. St Paul is content to say ‘now I know in part,’ in the assurance that ‘then I shall know even as I am fully known’. In other words, ‘good disagreement’ must not mean a state of perpetual ambiguity. We should hope and work for resolution to disagreements. There is such a thing as truth, and there is Someone who knows it — and will reveal it at the right time, whether now or in the age to come. But Paul reminds us (1 Cor 8. 1-3) that we need to be wary of claims to ‘knowledge’ (gnosis) that do not build up in love — and that we may

⁶ Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (CUP 1997): 18-21.

⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003): 297-98

⁸ Ibid. 300

⁹ Ibid. 298

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Harper, 2015), Letter XVI.

not know all the answers, this side of eternity. Paul has plenty to say on judgement, especially premature judgement — as do the Gospels (cf. the parables of the wheat and the tares (Matt 13.24-30, 36-43) and the fishing-net (Mt 13.47-50)).

43. Paul's teaching in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8-10 offers much to ponder for the Church today as we seek to deal with our deep and serious disagreements, not only on sexuality but on other issues too. It is our hope and prayer that we may be able to learn from Paul within the pain of disagreement to share the Christian hope that all our partial knowledge will eventually be fully illumined by the light of eternity, and in the meantime to hold on to the love — to the *being loved* — that holds us together in Christ – not that we loved God, but that he loved us (1 John 4.10).