Christian moral decision-making is often depicted as the equivalent of choosing the right kind of coffee from the supermarket shelf—an autonomous individual making rational choices.

But, says Rowan Williams, decisions are in fact made in community with other believers and are part of the process of growing in holiness. Handling differences in moral positions is not, therefore, about simply agreeing with one another, but about recognising whether such decisions are being made as part of a recognizable obedience to God as revealed in Scripture.

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9 781851 747986

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ISSN 1470-854X

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Deciding Differently

Rowan Williams' Theology of Moral Decision-making

Mike Higton

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Acknowledgments

I have written about the subject matter of this booklet more than once in recent years, and have ended up borrowing from various of those writings here. In particular, there is material from blog posts on goringe.net/theology, from 'The Ecclesial Body's Grace: Obedience and Faithfulness in Rowan Williams' Ecclesiology,' *Ecclesiology* 7 (2011), pp 7–28, and from *Christian Doctrine* (London: SCM, 2008). I am very grateful for the serious feedback on an earlier version of the text provided by Andrew Goddard, Charles Raven and Chris Sugden.

First Impression July 2011
ISSN 1470–854X
ISBN 978 1 85174 798 6

1 Introduction

When the bishops of the Anglican Communion gathered at the University of Kent for the 1998 Lambeth Conference, the topic that dominated news coverage with wearying predictability was homosexuality. What kind of moral decision would the Conference make about the church's stance towards homosexual people and relationships, and would the decision-making be 'moral' at all, given the Communion's rancorous disagreements?

Early in the conference there was a plenary that culminated in an address by the then Bishop of Monmouth, Dr Rowan Williams. The session was designed to remind the gathered bishops that there were many other moral issues facing the Anglican church worldwide, and to prompt some thinking about the *process* by which the church should consider and respond to such issues. It included a video introducing a range of dilemmas facing the Communion, and brief descriptions from bishops around the world of difficult moral questions troubling their dioceses, but it culminated with Williams speaking on 'Making Moral Decisions' in an address that was greeted—how long ago this seems now—not with a storm of controversy but with a standing ovation.[1]

This booklet takes Williams' address as a starting point for reflection on the process of Christian moral decision-making. It is not a guide to his moral theology as a whole, but nor is it simply a detailed exposition of that one speech. It is, rather, an attempt to think through and to explain the vision of decision-making that is pointed to by Williams' address, so as to enable readers to understand that vision, and to begin making their own judgments about its adequacy.

I will argue that Williams presents Christian moral decision-making as a *spiritual* discipline (one that is intimately tied to the processes by which, in the power of the Spirit, we stand before the Father and learn to live as brothers and sisters of Christ), as a *theological* discipline (one that requires our deepest reflection on the nature of the good news that has called us to become disciples of Christ), and as an *ecclesial* discipline (one that involves us learning to live together as a community of disciples, despite all our differences). I am going to begin, however, where Williams himself begins: with some reflections on the nature of 'choosing.'

2 Making Moral Decisions

I am standing in a supermarket, looking at the shelves filled with different brands of coffee. As a fully paid-up member of the muesli-reading, sandal-eating, *Guardian*-wearing classes, I am aware that there is a moral dimension to this choice, and I examine the jars for labels telling me whether the contents are fair-trade or organic, and whether the jars themselves are recycled. This might seem to be a classic case of moral decision-making: a matter of looking for the labels that mark each of the options—labels more or less visible, more or less easy to decipher, but which are the same for any viewer—in the belief that they determine where each available choice stands on the spectrum of moral worth.

I have been looking at these jars for some time, however, and I have a problem. Even when I have ruled out the jars that are not fair-trade, not organic, and which do not use recycled packaging, there still seem to be several possibilities left. Perhaps that means that I am free to go beyond objective moral decision-making, and enter the realm of subjective preference? But which of the remaining coffees do I *really* like? Being quite earnest even about this kind of decision, I might take some time to think my way past the blandishments of insistent advertising and clever branding, and past the shackles of unreflective habit, and try to think what it truly is that *I* like in a cup of coffee—digging down past distractions and illusions until I can be sure that the coffee I choose is my own deliberate decision, and reflects my own deep preferences. (I take my coffee seriously, as you can see.) And I might think that there is a kind of moral colouring to this decision as well: that I am trying, by reflecting in this way, to be 'true to myself,' and that being true to myself, being *authentic*, is, morally speaking a good thing.

In his 1998 address, Williams begins by describing a picture of decision-making rather like this. It, or something very like it, seems to be our culture's dominant way of thinking about morality. Moral decision-making is taken to be a process in which 'the will looks hard at the range of options and settles for one'—first rejecting any of the options that are objectively morally bad, and then identifying the authentic subjective desirability of any options left in play.

Williams suggests that this picture of moral decision-making is not by itself complex enough to capture the kinds of moral decision we are in practice called upon to make. Of course, he does not deny that there might be *some*

aspects (even some very important aspects) of moral decision-making that do work a bit like this, but Williams asks us to think about the range of decisions we are called upon to make, and to see how few of them fit into that neat box:

> Whom shall I marry? Shall I marry at all? Which charity shall I support this Christmas? Shall I resign from this political party, which is now committed to things I don't believe in—but is still better than the other parties in some ways? Should I become a vegetarian? Should I break the law and join an anti-government protest? Should I refuse to pay my taxes when I know they're partly used to buy weapons of mass destruction? How should I finish this poem or this novel? How should I finish my life if I know I'm dying? (pp 3–4)

Are these kinds of decision really a matter of checking the label to see which options are good and which are evil, and then of being thrown back onto questions of authentic subjective preference?

At first, it seems that Williams' answer is going to be to leave the broad lines of this overall picture of moral choice in place, but to lean very heavily in the 'authentic subjective preference' direction. After all, although he acknowledges that 'in some contexts, we can say, "You ought never to do that,"' he then insists that many of the decisions he lists are more complex than that, and are inevitably and properly 'coloured by the sort of person I am' (p 4), and that there will therefore be 'a significant sense in which only *I* can answer the question, "What ought I to do?"' (p 4).

Readers might well, therefore, begin to question his argument. Is he not being too easily dismissive of the role of questions about objective moral worth in Christian decision-making? Do all those questions that he lists, which seem more personal, really call for *moral* decision? Is he not therefore too easily corralling us into concentrating on authentic subjective preference as the keystone of moral decision-making? Those are certainly questions worth holding ready, I think—but if I understand the lecture correctly, Williams has not at this point really got started on his own argument. As his argument develops, it will become clear that he does not really want to start from here at all—neither with the objective moral worth nor the authentic subjective preference side of the supermarket choice picture. He nevertheless wants to take an audience for whom some such picture might be familiar, and gently nudge them towards a completely different framework—a properly theological framework.

3 Deciding as a Spiritual Discipline

Williams takes one more detour on the way to his own proper argument. He prods and pokes at the idea of moral decision-making as a matter of subjective preference until that idea begins to wobble and collapse—because he thinks he can use that collapse to say something more interesting about moral choice. The trouble, as Williams has explained elsewhere, is that authenticity—the idea that moral decision-making involves being true to ourselves—does not stand up to scrutiny.[2] When we speak about authentic subjectivity in this way, we are drawing upon a very powerful and very attractive picture of how things are—but a picture that has been invented, and that has its own history. Rather than being the way we *have* to see things, it is one evolving and questionable way of thinking about who we are and how life works. Indeed, in its dominant form, it is a pathology; it is ultimately destructive, deeply corrosive of real moral decision-making.

I am referring to that picture of the self that suggests that what is real, what is most properly me, is what goes on inside, behind closed doors, away from the distorting, inauthentic traffic of social life. I mean that picture of the self which suggests that my task is to work on the deceitful surfaces of my life—all the faces that I present in interactions with others, in groups, in institutions, in society—until they become transparent to the authentic depths of who I am when I am on my own. And I mean that picture of the self that suggests that authentic moral decision-making is a matter of being true to these inward depths of my individual being.

Becoming Ourselves with Others

What this myth obscures is that I become who I am only with and through others—and that I discover who I am only in company. By 'who I am,' I mean what I can contribute, what my real strengths and weaknesses are, what I need, what I can contribute, how responsive I can be and what decisions I should make when faced with a range of possible options. None of these are sitting there ready-made inside me, waiting only upon sufficiently penetrating forms of introspection, a sufficient effort of honesty, to become clear to me and so expressible to others. Rather, they emerge (both in the sense of becoming visible *and* in the sense of com-

I become who I am only with and through others

ing into existence) only as I enter seriously into conversation with others, experimenting, exploring, trying out, working—and discovering what resistances and what possibilities emerge over the course of those conversations. The self that I find in the process will be, and can only be, something that is both discovered and *made* in that very process. That is, the self I find would have been different had my conversation partners been different. Of course, it would also have been different had it been someone else, someone other than me, engaging with these same conversation partners—but there is in principle and in practice no sorting out what I have brought to this self from what others have brought to it.

Any inner dialogue I have, in which I tell myself my own story behind closed doors, is an imitation (and sometimes a pale and distorting imitation) of the dialogues I have with real others. The 'inner voice' that speaks in that dialogue is one particular conversation partner, and not necessarily a very good one. It might lie about who I am far more persistently and persuasively than any of my other conversation partners. If it has any insight, any true ability to see and communicate who I am, it will be because it has learnt it from real others over time. The inner voice, after all, develops—it can be taught new things, be given new words. It can be mistaken, and can learn. If I think my job is to go into conversation with others armed with the purity, the inviolability, of this inner voice, then I will simply be binding myself to immaturity and to error.

The inner voice can be mistaken, and can learn

Problems of Conversations with Others

None of this means, of course, that conversation with others is unproblematic. A conversation partner can impose upon me, can force me into a mould that I do not fit. A conversation partner can wittingly or unwittingly deny me, colonize me, or overwrite me. And that is because a so-called conversation partner can be inattentive, can take shortcuts, can disregard the possibilities and resistances that emerge in our conversation. A so-called conversation partner can be so taken up with the story he wants to tell that he refuses to allow me anything other than the role he has written for me. But the problem then is not that he is not listening to my authentic self, but rather that he is not letting me become or discover who I am in conversation with him; he is preventing me from becoming a self, not preventing me from expressing an already-formed selfhood. And that distinction is important, because without it we might fail to notice that one of the areas which can be colonized, distorted, imposed upon by others is precisely in the development of our own inner voice. It might well be that it is my own deep sense of who I am that has been

most deeply broken in my encounter with others—that the inner voice that tells the authentic story of who I am peddles lies it has learnt from others.

What we therefore need is not authenticity, if that means the stripping away of constraints until we can be outwardly who we now are already inwardly, but *love*. We need to be loved into being ourselves, by others who relate to us attentively, without simply overriding what emerges in that conversation with their own needs and projects. And if moral decision-making does indeed have to do with discovering what choice is true to who I really am, what choice is authentic, that will not be a matter of digging down to discover the ready-formed pure desire already buried somewhere within me, but of discovering how my desire is formed in the company of those who love me truly.

Williams can therefore say that ethics involves 'a difficult discovering of something about yourself, a discovering of what has already shaped the person you are and is moulding you in this or that direction' (p 4)—and he does not mean that ethical reflection is simply a matter of introspection, or of discovering our subjective preferences. It involves discovering who we *really* are and are becoming, and being freed from delusions about our true identity. And then he takes a theological turn, and says that the deepest element of that discovery is the realization that we are loved unreservedly and gratuitously by God.

Williams has been experimenting with a relatively non-theological discourse about selves and their relations, which might well be recognizable and plausible to people with no theological commitments. But he has been experimenting with that discourse precisely because it enables him to articulate what for him is this more fundamental theological conviction—that our identities are received from God, and that it is God (and God alone) who can tell us who we truly are. So when he reaches this point, he says with relief, 'This is where we may begin to talk theologically (at last)' (p 6). This is where the real nature of his own view of moral decision-making—and his real problems with the vision of decision-making with which he opened the lecture—finally become clear. We are not simply independent moral agents, standing on our own two subjective feet before a supermarket shelf of options, but are loved creatures, who are being drawn towards the fullness of our identity by being drawn by the Spirit to stand before the Father in the Son. *That* is our true nature, and real freedom of moral choice is the freedom to act in accordance with *that* nature—freedom to do what comes naturally, freedom from the delusions and distortions that have twisted our lives into unnatural, sin-ridden shapes, and blinded us to how unnatural they are. Indeed, freedom of moral decision-making might in some circumstances mean the freedom to discover and do the *only* thing that accords with our real

We are not independent moral agents but loved creatures being drawn towards our true nature

nature—freedom to do the one thing possible for us (p 5). And such freedom is not very much like the freedom of a consumer facing a supermarket shelf.

Moral Decision-making and Christian Identity

So, we have now reached the first major aspect of Williams' positive argument. Turning away from the 'objective moral worth' question to think about 'authentic subjective preference' was only important because the proponents of subjective preference have, in a distorted and inadequate fashion, got one thing right: my moral decision-making *does* have to do with understanding how the options in front of me (with whatever objective features they might have) relate to who I really am. That, however, is only because Christian moral decision-making involves learning my *true* nature, my nature which is hidden with God in Christ (Colossians 3.3), and thereby learning what it is *truly* natural for me to do; it is at the same time a matter of unlearning under the hand of God's discipline all distorted understandings of my self and my place in the world. The rather hasty moves by which, at the start of the lecture, Williams took us through the supermarket-shelf picture of decision-making, and led us into thinking about authentic preference, were simply echoes in advance of this most basic claim: Christian moral decision-making should flow from who we are becoming in Christ, by the power of the Spirit, before the Father.

But the process by which we learn this true identity and unlearn false identity simply *is* the journey of discipleship. It is the journey on which we are drawn ever deeper by the Spirit into the death of the old Adam (the death of the unnatural, distorted, sinful self-understanding) and the life of the new (being raised to our true identity in Christ), on the way to the Father. Christian moral decision-making is therefore inseparable from the spiritual journey of discipleship or (to put it another way) from growth in holiness—not because making the right decisions will make us holy, but because becoming holy is the route to deciding well. Christian moral decision-making is a spiritual matter.

4 Deciding as a Theological Discipline

At the heart of Williams' account of moral decision-making, then, there is not a distinct discipline called 'Christian ethics' that we might learn to pursue alongside other Christian disciplines and tasks. Rather, there is the one Christian discipline of learning to live as disciples—learning to live holy lives in the world as members of the community that God is calling together. Christian moral decision-making is the kind of decision-making that emerges from people who are learning to become more deeply Christian. And that means, for Williams, that the ethical demands that Christians face are not something different from or supplementary to the gospel, as if God first gave us the good news of salvation in Christ, and then as a distinct move gave us a set of rules and values by which to live. The ethical demand placed upon us is nothing other than the demand contained in the good news itself, which we might inadequately but not unfairly summarize as the demand to live as those who are loved freely and gratuitously by God, and the demand to live with the others whom God loves in the same way.

For Williams, the ethical demand is the demand contained in the good news itself

The Shape of Christian Moral Deliberation

This is, I think, the point of the section in the address where Williams says that Christians 'don't automatically have more information about moral truth *in the abstract* than anyone else' (p 6, my emphasis), but that '[w]hat is different is the relations in which they are involved,' and, most centrally, the fact that 'God ha[s] already established relation with them.' Christians moral decision-making, he is saying, is not a matter of Christians being given access to a whole set of extra labels that give us abstract moral information about the supermarket options in front of us. Rather, the one thing that Christians know that others do not know is the good news that God in Christ has gratuitously established a perfectly loving covenant with us—but it is knowledge of that covenant that transforms our vision of the whole moral landscape within which we decide and act.

Christian moral deliberation therefore has a certain characteristic shape to it. It is not *primarily* a matter of following rules, by which I mean that when asked, 'Why do you behave that way?' the characteristic Christian answer is

not, 'Because we are instructed to by the law that God has graciously given us, and no more can be said than that.' Rather, when asked, 'Why do you behave that way?' the characteristic Christian answer is, 'Because, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' or 'Because we are being drawn by the Spirit into the body of Christ to stand in worship before the Father.' The good news of salvation in Christ by the Spirit is the deep reason why we are called to behave and decide as we do—even if, in practice, it might sometimes be hard to trace the connections between that good news and the behaviour or decision-making in question.

Moral Deliberation in the Pauline Epistles

This might become a little clearer if we follow in Williams' footsteps in the 1998 address, and attend to the way in which moral deliberation works in the epistles of Paul (p 7). After his conversion, Paul travelled from place to place to establish or encourage Christian congregations. He was, therefore, unable to look after any one of those congregations directly for long, and if he was to stay in touch with them at all it could only be by infrequent communication from a distance, by means of envoys and letters. In his communications with those churches, and his attempts to instruct them on how to live as followers of Christ, Paul sometimes trusted simply to the relevant church's respect for his personal authority, and their willingness simply to take his word for it. However, maintaining charismatic authority at a distance, particularly when there are other charismatic leaders more readily to hand, is difficult, and Paul was thrown back on other strategies. One of the central strategies he adopts in his letters is to persuade his readers that the particular advice he is offering on some problematic moral decision that faces them is the natural outworking of the faith that they have already received—a continuation of the narrative that had begun with their conversion and their gathering into a church.

Paul tries to make people see that they already implicitly have the answer to their moral questions

Paul characteristically tries, therefore, to make the recipients of his letters see that they already implicitly have the answer to their moral questions, or could in principle have derived for themselves the moral instruction he proceeds to pass on. In the faith they have already received and begun to live—the core Christian practices, experiences and teachings with which they are familiar—they have in embryo all the guidance they need if they want to know how to live in a Christian way in their current situation.

In 1 Corinthians 8, for example, Paul addresses the Corinthians' question about whether it was permissible for them to buy meat from the Corinthian public markets, even though such meat would certainly have been offered

to idols during the slaughtering and preparation process. Paul's response is built upon what they already know: that there is but one God (8.4); that Jesus Christ is Lord (8.6); that Christ died for each and every one of them (8.10), and so on. Similarly, when he returns to the issue in a subsequent chapter, he draws on further ideas about the Lord's supper (10.16) and creation (10.26). On the foundation provided by those teachings, which they already know and trust, he builds his answer to their question.

He insists, however, in a comment that is very easy to misunderstand, that his readers should 'judge for themselves' what he says (10.15). This is not a call for them to weigh this moral decision in the scales of their own subjective preference. Rather, he is asking them to recognize that the foundation on which he builds his answer is indeed composed of teachings and practices they already hold to—and so to recognize that they could in principle have given this answer themselves, in obedience to the gospel.

Paul's need to assist far-flung churches to govern themselves connects here to his deepest Christian beliefs. He believes that God has laid hold of the world lovingly in Jesus Christ, and that this changes everything—and, in a sense, tells Christians the one thing they need to know, such that one can properly resolve to 'know nothing but Christ and him crucified' (2.2). God has not, in Christ, handed the Corinthian Christians a detailed set of regulations covering every eventuality (including a clear adjudication of the idol-meat question), but has given them the one thing they need in order to know how to *work out* how questions like that of idol meat should be resolved.

Of course, Paul thinks he is the best guide to their existing belief, the one able to offer the most convincing ways of telling their story so far, but this is not quite the same as simply relying upon his personal authority, or the authority of a clear set of instructions already delivered to them. Neither, however, is it simply a case of their straightforwardly 'applying' the faith they have already received through him. The Corinthians are going to have to work, with Paul's guidance, to understand that faith more deeply. And, of course, they might find that this process of learning the nature and implications of the gospel proceeds in part by their being taught its moral demands, so that there might be contexts in which learning the demands comes first, and understanding the underlying connection to the gospel comes later. Nevertheless, the characteristic form of moral guidance in the New Testament is not simply the giving of rules, but the giving of rules that are established on the foundation of the good news.

Moral Decision-making and Deliberation

Christian readers of the New Testament are therefore not simply called to follow rules, but to *understand* how they are called to live in the light of the gospel. Christian moral decision-making is, we might say, inherently deliberative, inherently connected to reasoning, if by 'reasoning' we mean the processes by which the implications of the gospel are teased out and explored. It is *mediated* by processes of thinking about the gospel. Christians hope that they are learning to become the kind of people for whom living gospel-driven lives is natural, even automatic—in which they are completely freed to live in accordance with their true nature, perhaps. But deliberation about the gospel and its implications is central to the processes by which such naturalness is learned, and by which uncertainties or disagreements about how to pursue it are resolved. Christian moral decision-making inherently involves deliberation about the gospel; it is inherently theological.

5 Deciding as an Ecclesial Discipline

What, however, is the gospel on which our moral decision-making should be based? What is the substance that fills out the form I have just described? Williams argues that the question Paul tells the Corinthians they need to ask, if they wish to live in the light of the gospel, is how they can live as recipients of God's utterly gracious love.

> What will guide me is the need to show in my choices the character of the God who has called me and the character of the community I belong to; my God is a God whose concern for all is equal; my community is one in which all individual actions are measured by how securely they build up a pattern of selfless engagement with the interest of the other—which in itself (if we link it up to what else Paul has to say) is a manifestation of the completely costly directedness to the other that is shown in God's act in Christ. (p 7)

This, Williams suggests, is the heart of the gospel; and it is by returning to this heart again and again to ask what it means to live in response to it that we will learn what moral decisions are required of us. Those who have read more widely in Williams' work will recognize this as a characteristically Williamsish presentation of the gospel.[3] He habitually finds himself arranging the rest of what the Bible and the Christian tradition say about God's saving work around the idea of God's gratuitous, uncaused love for all creatures. This is his characteristic accent or idiom.

Of course, there are lots of questions to ask about this presentation of the gospel. At various points in the previous section I gave rather terse summaries, which placed God's utterly gratuitous love centre-stage, and claimed that the whole gospel reduces to that one fact. Elsewhere, I have briefly touched upon a wider range of topics—creation, covenant, Communion, Christology, the Spirit—and so suggested that the content of 'gospel' cannot easily be reduced to one point. To understand how these things go together in Williams' construal of the gospel, however, would take us beyond the remit of this booklet—and the salient point here is simply the very fact that Williams speaks about the gospel in his own recognizable accent or idiom—and that other Christians are likely to speak about the gospel in *different* accents or idioms, with dif-

ferences that are not simply cosmetic, but which feed through into different conclusions about the moral decisions Christians should make.

The most obvious response to this recognition might be to treat such differences as something like dispensable subjective preferences, to ignore them in favour of the objective claims on which all Christians should agree, and then to use that agreed set of points as the basis on which to build a consensus about moral decisions that *all* Christians should make, regardless of the secondary differences in the ways they understand the gospel. And some such attempt to set out what is central and unavoidable has long been part of the way in which Christians have responded to disagreements and divisions—though it has perhaps not played quite as central a role in Anglicanism as it has in other traditions where a detailed 'confession' of some kind has been central to ongoing theological conversation.

Williams, however, suggests a rather different way of thinking about this question. Faced with Christians who make what we regard as mistaken claims about the gospel and its moral implications, we should first of all be asking not whether their claims agree with ours, but whether their claims are grown in the soil of a recognizable obedience to the God of Jesus Christ. 'If I might put it in a formula that may sound too much like jargon,' he says,

> I suggest that what we are looking for in each other is the *grammar of obedience*: we watch to see if our partners take the same kind of time, sense that they are under the same sort of judgment or scrutiny, approach the issue with the same attempt to be dispossessed by the truth they are engaging with. This will not guarantee agreement; but it might explain why we should always first be hesitant and attentive to each other. Why might anyone think this might count as a gift of Christ to the church? (p 11)

That final question is the crucial one for understanding what Williams means here—and for understanding what most concerns him about the debates within the Anglican Communion. Suppose I encounter another Christian, who I know has been involved in making moral decisions about the same sort of issues that I have had to face. I might start by being interested in whether that other Christian has decided the same way as me or not. But that is not the only question I should ask. Even if I find that the answer to that first question is negative, and that this other Christian has come to moral conclusions that I find reprehensible, I still have reason to hesitate and to be attentive. Can I, Williams asks, look at that other Christian and recognize that he or she came to that disturbing conclusion on the basis of a serious attempt to be obedient to the gospel? Can I see that he or she is recognizably reading the same

Scriptures, praying with the same seriousness, worshipping the same God? Can I see that his or her discernment is being offered as a gift to the church, an attempt to show the church more of the church's Lord and the demands that his love makes on our lives?

In other words, Williams is suggesting that we ask whether, having heard what our opponent says, we can recognize the *possibility* of being called to deeper obedience to the gospel (given what we currently understand that obedience to mean) by that opponent's attempt at obedience, and whether we can see the possibility (given what our opponent appears currently to understand obedience to the gospel to mean) of calling him or her to deeper obedience.

With a question like this in mind, we might move from a picture of the world divided into those with whom I agree *versus* those with whom I disagree to a more complex picture in which, around that brittle inner circle, there is the more unruly company of those with whom I disagree but with whom I share enough to sustain a serious conversation about obedience—the wider circle of a community not in possession of consensus but in serious pursuit of it, hoping and working for it.

Williams quite deliberately offered an example other than homosexuality to help the audience in Lambeth in 1998 understand what he meant, not because that example provided the template for his thinking about moral decision-making, but because it enabled him to illustrate that thinking in a way that might trigger fewer entrenched responses. He spoke about support of 'the manufacture and retention of weapons of mass destruction' (p 9)—a position he believes deeply incompatible with the gospel—by some Christians who clearly 'make themselves accountable to the central truths of our faith.'

> I cannot at times believe that we are reading the same Bible; I cannot understand what it is that could conceivably speak of the nature of the body of Christ in any defence of such strategy. But these are people I meet at the Lord's Table; I know they hear the Scriptures I hear, and I am aware that they offer their discernment as a gift to the body. (p 9)

The boundary of this wider circle, within which we can recognize a shared seriousness about obedience to the gospel, is inevitably much more difficult to discern than are the boundaries of consensus—but boundaries there certainly are. And those boundaries are not defined simply by the bare *forms* of obedience, by the bare fact that my opponent appeals to the same Scriptures, say, or tells a broadly recognizable salvation-historical story. Williams asks us, yes, whether we can recognize that our opponents 'hear the same Scriptures I hear,' but it is not simply a matter of them having the same book open in front of them. He asks whether we can see that our opponent is involved in

seriously making himself or herself accountable to those Scriptures, and to the gospel that they proclaim, in a recognizable way. (It is perhaps worth stressing here that accountability to the Scriptures is central to the vision of moral decision-making that Williams sets out—even if, as I will be explaining in a moment, he acknowledges that Christians differ about what such accountability demands.) It is only when this recognition of accountability to the gospel breaks down that I might find myself called to the tragic recognition that an opponent and I do not share a recognizable conversation, that I cannot call him or her to obedience (nor can he or she call me) except by standing against him or her, in prophetic denunciation of one kind or another. (Here, as elsewhere, Williams uses the example of the Confessing Church in the 1930s, whose leaders came to believe that they needed to stand decisively against the Nazification of the German church.)

Accountability to the Scriptures is central to the vision of moral decision-making that Williams sets out

Examples of Disagreement

Let me illustrate all this by imagining two kinds of disagreements that Christian readers might have about the implications of Romans 1.20–32.

> 20 Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; 21 for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools; 23 and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.
>
> 24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.
>
> 26 For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, 27 and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.
>
> 28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. 29 They were

filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, [30] slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, [31] foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. [32] They know God's decree, that those who practise such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practise them.

Romans 1.20–32, NRSV

I want you to imagine four Christian readers of this passage, who for reasons purely alphabetic we will call Alvin, Bertha, Chuck and Dora. We will begin with Bertha, a fairly conservative exegete, and Chuck, a more liberal exegete. The two might agree that verses 20 to 25 describe the loss of a right ordering of life—a life centred upon true worship of God. They might agree that verses 26 and 27 suggest that this right ordering is also, perhaps fundamentally, a right ordering of *desire*, an ordering centred upon desire of God, but within which there is a place for proper sexual desire. They might agree that sin is presented as a breakdown of this proper ordering, so that although it will have many symptoms, the disordering of specifically sexual desire will loom large amongst them—such that it will be, from at least one angle of vision, the *characteristic* sin (along with explicit idolatry). That, however, is where the agreement in this imagined conversation between Bertha and Chuck will end.

Bertha, the more conservative exegete, might see in this passage a window into the connection between two fundamental natural orderings in which human beings stand: the primary ordering of creator and creature, and the subordinate ordering of male and female that is a divinely ordained mirror of the creator/creature ordering. The disordering of the creator/creature ordering—a matter of the creature's desire slipping its moorings from its most proper divine object, and attaching itself to creatures—is dramatized or mirrored by a similar disordering of the desire properly associated with the male/female ordering, before showing its true colours in all the other forms of disordered desire represented by the vice list in verses 29 to 31. Reading the passage this way, Bertha ends up not simply with an affirmation of a straightforward reading of the particular condemnations voiced by the text in verses 26 and 27, but with a whole pattern of reasoning, of deliberation, that makes sense of those condemnations. And her exegesis leaves her with the task of reasoning this out: exploring the right ordering of male to female and creature to creator, and the way in which those orderings are linked, and that link is to be honoured—a much more open and complex task than simply acquiescing in a condemnation (though Bertha would probably want to stress that her exegesis does not in any way involve wriggling free of that condemnation).

On the other hand, Chuck, the more liberal exegete, might focus precisely on the way in which the vice list in verses 29 to 31 describes the general character of disordered life: it is malicious, covetous, envious, it is haughty, boastful, proud. Recalling another famous Pauline passage, Chuck might say that disordered life is fundamentally life devoid of that Christlike love that is patient, kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude; disordered life is life characterized by a turning away from selflessness to self-gratification. Chuck might argue that it only makes sense for Paul to put a description of certain patterns of sexual desire in the centre of this passage if those patterns of desire are ones in which the individual's gratification is the central, the all-consuming element—if, that is, the same-sex desire that Paul is describing here automatically means a form of desire which, by its very nature, is incapable of truly loving mutuality. And Chuck might note that, in the specific context in which Paul wrote, it is not too difficult to see how the forms of homosexual relationship most visible to him (for example, cultic prostitution and pederasty) might well have led him to precisely such a supposition. It is then open to Chuck to argue that, nevertheless, there *are* other forms of same-sex sexual relationship, forms either unimagined by Paul or at least not in view in this passage, that are fully capable—no less capable than heterosexual relationships—of displaying a Godly love and faithfulness, and that are simply not characterized by the inherent rapacity that Paul describes here. And whereas Bertha's reading might involve her in tracing the connections between the creator/creator relationship and the male/female relationship, Chuck's reading might involve him in a rethinking of claims about what it means for desires to be natural or unnatural—detaching such ideas from claims about biological complementarity between the sexes, say, and reworking them in a Christological way, so that for something to be natural is for it to be capable of conformity to Christlike love.

Chuck is no less than Bertha, attempting to hold himself accountable to the gospel

Chuck is not, then, engaged in airy dismissal of the text—he is, no less than Bertha, attempting to hold himself accountable to the gospel that the text proclaims, to the task of exploring the contours of selflessness and self-gratification, and to taking seriously the ways in which selflessness and gratification play themselves out in a whole variety of sexual relationships, regardless of the gender of the participants.

I am only sketching these arguments, of course, and it is not my purpose here to pursue either of them further, still less to adjudicate between them. My point is simply this: that each of these arguments is recognizably an attempt at reasoned faithfulness to the gospel, to this specific text in its witness to the gospel, and to the whole biblical witness within which this text sits. One can

imagine Bertha and Chuck disagreeing very sharply, each believing that the other has been led into a major error with serious consequences, but nevertheless each acknowledging that the other has been led into that serious error despite attentively listening to the text, and a recognizably devout attempt to be obedient to the gospel that the text proclaims. And each might recognize not simply that the other has been led into error, and needs to be called back to truthfulness, but that the other has nevertheless seen things about the text, and about the nature of the gospel that it proclaims, that deserve to be taken seriously. Bertha might recognize, even in the midst of her sharp and serious disagreement with Chuck, a call to deeper obedience in what Chuck says; Chuck might recognize the same call to deeper obedience in what Bertha says. Each might recognize that he or she is, despite the rift between them that neither can overlook or trivialize, part of a common project of attentiveness and obedience, albeit one marred by the existence of what Williams in his lecture called 'deep and sometimes agonizing conflict.'

After his conversation with Bertha, however, we might find Chuck locked in debate with Alvin. In the previous section, I argued that Williams' appeals to Scripture in ethical argument are properly deliberative, properly *mediated*. That is, the material gleaned from Scripture is subjected to a process of reasoning, where the emphasis falls on the attempt to understand the deep patterns that move the Scriptures as a whole, and then to read particular injunctions in the light of those deep patterns, even when that means that a more simplistic reading of those particular injunctions is called into question. Both Chuck and Bertha's readings, described above, have exactly this mediated, deliberative structure to them. So Chuck does not stop at reading the statement in verses 26 and 27 and then applying it; he does not even stop with the attempt to ascertain the meaning or meanings that the Greek text of those verses would have had for its original author and readers. Rather, Chuck embarks upon an attempt to understand the nature of the argument of the text, and to understand how that argument relates to the gospel message. The willingness to rethink what 'natural' might mean is perhaps the most controversial element of this in Chuck's case; it might not be justified by the historical-critical argument that such a rethinking would have been in Paul's mind or the mind of his original audience, but might (according to Chuck) be justified as the meaning that makes most sense in the context of the wider witness of Scripture. (Whether or not that is the case is not my concern here; I am simply assuming that Chuck honestly and seriously claims that this is the case.)

Imagine, though, that Chuck found himself speaking to Alvin, who regards 'obedience to the gospel' as quite straightforwardly defined by unmediated appeal to the Scriptures. (I should perhaps say that I do not have any real 'Alvins' in mind, here; I am constructing him out of straw for the sake of my

argument.) Alvin might find that Chuck's arguments were simply irrelevant to his own way of doing sexual ethics—or, worse, that Chuck's arguments seemed like nothing more than sophisticated attempts to sidestep the Scriptures, to *avoid* being held to account by them. Alvin would be incapable of seeing Chuck's arguments as calling him to deeper obedience (as Alvin currently understands obedience). And Chuck might find in return that Alvin's arguments simply cannot call him to deeper obedience, because the means by which Alvin seeks to call him—simply pointing out once again the plain sense of the Scriptures in question—does not engage with the processes of deliberation by which Chuck's pursuit of obedience is mediated. In such a situation, we might have to conclude that there is not a common conversation about obedience between Chuck and Alvin; the conversation has stuttered to a halt.

The conversation would also stutter to a halt were Dora to get involved. She sees herself as fighting against the church's ingrained homophobia, and thinks Paul is simply as part of the problem. She thinks that Chuck's arguments are too convoluted to be useful, and that however wrong they are ethically, Bertha and Alvin are exegetically right: these texts condemn homosexuality, and they are thus representative of Scripture as a whole which—on this topic at least—is simply and straightforwardly wrong. The relevant texts might or might not be understandable in their own historical contexts, but Dora thinks that now that we have learnt the truth about human sexuality we simply need to recognize how distorted and damaging these texts are, and stop being held back by them. It is hard to see how a genuine common conversation, based on recognition of shared accountability to the sources of the faith, could unite even Chuck and Dora, still less Dora and Bertha or Alice.

Between Bertha and Chuck, however, the conversation need not fail, and there remains at least the possibility for them of what I earlier called 'a community not in possession of consensus but in serious pursuit of it, hoping and working for it.'

Christ-shaped Unity

The biggest question to be posed to Williams' argument as a whole is, I think, whether this is an adequate way of defining the difference between disagreements that should divide the church, and disagreements that should not. In particular, it is important to ask whether his account of a unity defined by mutual recognition of the 'grammar of obedience' draws the boundaries of communion too loosely, and so makes for a unity that compromises truth. He insists that '[u]nity at all costs is indeed not a Christian goal; our unity is Christ-shaped, or it is empty' (p 13)—but does his account of the form of that unity secure that constant focus on Christ? There is much to be said on both sides of that question, and commentators on Williams' theology disagree.

One thing is very clear, however. Keeping such a community going will be a costly business. Bertha and Chuck might still be able to recognize each other as Christian brother and sister, but that does not mean that they can overlook their real differences. As Williams says:

> If I conclude that my Christian brother or sister is deeply and damagingly mistaken in their decision, I accept for myself the brokenness in the body that this entails. These are my wounds; just as the one who disagrees with me is wounded by what they consider my failure or even betrayal. (p 11)

And therefore

> [t]o remain in communion is to remain in solidarity with those who I believe are wounded as well as wounding the church, in the trust that in the body of Christ the confronting of wounds is part of opening ourselves to healing. (p 11)

This sense of the cost of communion has remained a clear note in Williams' theology—but he always presents it as a cost worth bearing. For instance, in his Presidential Address to the 2009 Meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council, after speaking of the deep costs experienced on different sides of the debate about sexuality, he said:

> Deep cost—different costs—but here is the first big challenge. How can those who share that sense of cost and that sense of profound anxiety about how to make the gospel credible—how are they to come together at least for some recognition and respect to emerge? How are they to come together so that they can recognize the cost that the other bears, and also recognize the deep seriousness about Jesus and his gospel that they share? As with so many observations of this sort, I have to add immediately [that] I know that won't solve the problem. All I know is that it's part of the imperative of dealing with this [that is, the imperative of making moral decisions] in a Christian way, not just in terms of managing something or glossing over something.[4]

In the General Synod in February 2009, in response to someone's comment about the proposed Anglican covenant involving a giving up of decision-making rights, Williams said,

> I don't believe that a process of shared discernment is a handing over of something that belongs to me to someone to whom it does not belong,

> because I have a rather more, excuse the word, robust doctrine of our participation in the body of Christ than that. I don't believe that when I invite someone else to share my own process of prayer and decision-making I'm resigning something which I ought to be clinging on to. I believe rather than I'm trying to discover more fully who I am in Christ by inviting others who share my life in Christ into the process of making a decision.[5]

In other words, we are not simply dealing here with Williams' prescriptions for managing disagreement, or for coping when the processes of Christian moral decision-making run into difficulties. Christian moral decision-making is *properly and necessarily* a matter of inviting others to share in our processes of prayer and discernment; and it is properly and necessarily a matter of inviting them precisely in their difference from us. Our brothers and sisters in Christ have different histories, different relationships, different contexts—and it is that difference from us which makes it possible for their discernment of the nature and implications of the gospel to be a *gift* to us, something we could not have seen without their prompting.

Williams therefore holds out a vision not of a church riven by disagreements, but of a community engaged in mutual calls to deeper obedience to the gospel. Without quite making it clear how this will look if we turn from interpersonal relations to communal relations, he sets out a picture of a church in which—to use my example from a moment ago—not only does Bertha seek Chuck's deeper obedience, but in which Bertha also seeks Chuck's seeking of her own deeper obedience. That is, Bertha sees that she can call Chuck to deeper obedience, and she longs for that, but she also recognizes that—precisely because he is recognizably serious about obedience, but sees things differently—he can call *her* to deeper obedience, and she longs for that too. This is a community in which each is 'handed over' to the other, in which each learns to become more human, and to become more holy, through the other.

> It is in such a community that Christian moral decision-making belongs: perhaps the most important challenge to some of our conventional ways of talking about morality comes from the biblical principle that sees ethics as essentially part of our reflection on the nature of the body of Christ. (p 7)

And it is in such a community that the journey into holiness discussed in chapter 3 above belongs. To become holy means learning

> to act in such a way that my action becomes something given into the life of the community and in such a way that what results is glory—the radiating, the visibility, of God's beauty in the world; (p 7)

and it means

> looking and listening for Christ in the acts of another Christian who is manifestly engaged, self-critically engaged, with the data of common belief and worship. (p 13)

Christian moral decision-making is an ecclesial discipline.

6 Conclusion

Christian moral decision-making is, for Williams, not something that we can do in the abstract. It is a process that belongs in a certain kind of corporate and individual life. It is properly pursued by people who are becoming holy, where that means people who are, in the power of the Spirit, responding to the call to learn who they are in the light of the good news of God's love for the world in Jesus Christ—and whose lives are therefore becoming reflections of that love in their own particular contexts and idioms, and who are at the same time learning to recognize and receive more of that love from others who reflect it differently. Christian moral decision-making is not a *precondition* for such lives of holiness; it *emerges* from lives that are becoming holy in this way, and the process of seeking agreement together on difficult areas of moral decision-making can itself be one of the ways in which we become holy. And it is with that vision that Williams' Lambeth address finishes. In Christian moral decision-making, he says,

> I am brought back to the fundamental question of where and who I am: a person moulded by a specific Christian community and its history and culture, for whom Christ has become real here with these people; but a person also committed, by my baptism, to belonging with Christian strangers…I am not sure what or how I can learn from them. They may frighten me by the difference of their priorities and their discernment. But because of where we all stand at the Lord's Table, in the body, I have to listen to them and to struggle to make recognizable sense to them. If I have any grasp at all of what the life of the Body is about, I shall see to it that I spend time with them, doing nothing but sharing the contemplation of Christ. At the very least, it will refresh the only thing that can be a real and effective motive for the making of Christian moral decision: the vision of a living Lord whose glory I must strive to make visible. (p 14)

Notes

1 The address is available in the online Lambeth Conference archives, at www.lambethconference.org/1998/news/lc035.cfm (accessed 19 May 2011); it was published in the *Sewanee Theological Review* 42 (Easter), pp 147–158; the *Anglican Theological Review* 81 (Spring), pp 295–308 and in Robin Gill (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) pp 3–15. I have given page numbers in the text to the Gill edition.

2 The discussion in this section is based in part on Williams' article, 'The Suspicion of Suspicion,' in Richard Bell (ed), *Grammar of the Heart: New Essays in Moral Philosophy and Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1998) pp 36–53; reprinted in Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, M Higton (ed) (London: SCM, 2002) pp 186–202.

3 See Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: SCM, 2004) pp 1–2.

4 Available at www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1510/ (accessed 19 May 2011); *cf* 'Communion, Covenant and our Anglican Future: Reflections on the Episcopal Church's 2009 General Convention,' 27 July 2009, available at www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1505/ (accessed 19 May 2011), §20.

5 Available at www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/828/ (accessed 19 May 2011).

Christian moral decision-making is often depicted as the equivalent of choosing the right kind of coffee from the supermarket shelf—an autonomous individual making rational choices.

But, says Rowan Williams, decisions are in fact made in community with other believers and are part of the process of growing in holiness. Handling differences in moral positions is not, therefore, about simply agreeing with one another, but about recognising whether such decisions are being made as part of a recognizable obedience to God as revealed in Scripture.

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