

## E mail conversations between Biblical Scholars from differing theological view-points – Information Sheet

### Background

Following the first Phase of the *Bible in the Life of the Church [BILC]* project questions were raised as to whether its work adequately addressed some of the key biblical and theological questions that lie behind the way we, as a Communion, engage with Scripture. In Phase 2 we sought a way to try and respond to this comment and find a process for doing so that might offer a model for future explorations of difference across the Communion.

The **four key questions** this aspect of the BILC work we sought to address were:

1. What is it that makes an approach to biblical authority and biblical interpretation distinctively Anglican?
2. What does the Bible say about itself?
3. Differences in hermeneutic method are sometimes put forward as reasons for divergence over what Scripture teaches. To what extent is this the case?
4. 'Attentive' or 'responsible' readings of Scripture are ways of paying heed to what they teach, while avoiding simplistic or misleading interpretations. How necessary and helpful are such approaches? In employing them, how might dependence on theories about interpretation be avoided?

The **process** we devised to explore these questions was by means of a three-way E mail 'conversation' in three stages:

*Stage 1:* A Statement setting out each participant's understanding of the question, to be exchanged before:

*Stage 2:* The 1st Response to the others' statements, to be exchanged before:

*Stage 3:* The 2nd Response to the Responses of the others.

We then invited each participant, *if they wished to*, to write a short epilogue reflecting on what being involved in this kind of conversation offered them in terms of their understanding about the issue in question.

We set a number of simple '**ground-rules**' to the exercise to try and keep these conversations within limits of length, time and suitability for an audience of 'ordinary Anglicans'. These were:

- That both the Statements and Responses are no longer than 1,200 words.
- That these Statements and Conversation are confidential to the three participants and only the final agreed edited text of the 'conversation' becomes a public document.
- That this be a 'conversation' and not an academic (or other) debate – “we respect 'the other' even if we disagree!”
- That the 'conversation' be readable - in its final edited form - by 'ordinary



- Anglicans' i.e. Anglicans with no formal theological education
- That Statements and Responses are not full of footnotes or endnotes

These conversations began in January 2015 and were brought to the form in which they are available here by March 2016.

### **Reflections on the process and outcomes**

Some of the initial hopes and aspirations for this aspect of the BILC work were not achieved:

- The geographical spread of participants was extremely limited with all those involved coming from backgrounds either originating in the United Kingdom or the USA. This was not for want of trying; but the approach we were taking led to a number of requests made to scholars in Africa, Asia and South America turning down the offer to be involved.
- The suggested process of a three-stage conversation was only achieved in two of the conversations. Unforeseen time constraints on the participants and the need to complete the exercise itself meant that two of the conversations are incomplete in their originally envisaged form. They are published here, with the permission of the participants, in their unfinished form as we believe they still have value for the wider Communion.
- Also, not surprisingly, sometimes the word count, footnotes and language did not always fulfil the 'ground-rules'!

However, I do believe that, despite these short-comings, this aspect of the overall BILC initiative did secure a number of significant achievements:

- It offers a model for theological discourse across areas of difference through 'conversation' – be it that the 'conversation' was at a distance and in electronic form. The E mails that accompanied the exchange of the formally written pieces – which deliberately are not recorded here due to their personal nature – convey clearly the respect given for the views of those involved, a gracious 'listening' to another's view-point and thanks for the insights the 'conversations' offered.
- In the printed texts of each conversation we see not only the different view-points expressed but also a desire to engage with view-points different from one's own in a constructive fashion so as to learn from and build on as well as confronting the other.
- Finally, these four conversations begin to identify the theological and biblical roots of the differences we experience in our life together as a Communion of churches when we engage with Scripture. They are not the last word on any of these questions but they do offer a foundation and a framework that might be built upon in the future.

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