THE FUTURE OF OUR RELIGIOUS PAST *

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This article enquires about the relation between our religious past and our present situation in the Church. The religious past in question specifically concerns the Westminster Confession of Faith, the three hundred and fiftieth anniversay of which was celebrated in 1997. Three areas are addressed: (a) doctrine (b) ethics and (c) love. They correspond to the 'tests of life' set forward in 1 John, but 1 John sets the rubrics rather than provides the material for the article.

In 1603, the crowns of Scotland and England were united, thus propelling the new United Kingdom into a phase of existence which many of us think has begun to come to an end with the constitutional reforms presided over by Tony Blair. The path to the new ecclesiastical settlement, which secured a Protestant succession to the throne and the political settlement, which secured the union of Parliaments, lay through a Civil War, a Commonwealth and an Assembly at Westminster which produced a Confession of Faith, Catechisms and other documents. This year, in 1997, we commemorate the publication of that Confession.

To many in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) and beyond, the achievement of the Confession is, if not theologically final in an absolute sense, at least theologically definitive in a practical sense; that is, it defines that to which theologically, and not just legally, the denomination is bound. It constitutes one of the glories or our religious past, and it remains crucial for our religious future. The precise status of the Confession, as far as

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denominational history is concerned (whatever may be the case in law) is controversial. It is a subordinate standard, but precisely to what one is bound and in what one is free, when it comes to subscription, is variously interpreted. I shall not be addressing that particular issue; I am not competent to do so in all respects, and it would be inappropriate to do so on this occasion. In any case, the relatively narrow question of what subscription strictly involves is far less important for the Church than the question of our attitude towards our heritage, and our appropriation of it in the present and for the future. At stake in Irish (and other) Presbyterianism(s) today is the question of whether we so appropriate our religious past that it helps to liberate the Church of today to be faithful to her living Head, or that it shackles, retards and impedes our development and witness. What is written in the Confession is written, and what is done is done; but its future, as an instrument of liberation or impediment, is open.

Many years ago, Robert Law wrote a book on 1 John, titled *The Tests of Life*.[1] Law's thesis was that the literary structure of that epistle was governed by three themes, which give us the tests of Christian life. These are (a) doctrine, (b) behaviour and (c) attitude. Without following the themes as Law or John develop them, I want to organize what I have to say under these three heads so that the fainthearted who fear that a radical note sounds through in the previous paragraph may take comfort in the appearance of submissive traditionalism.

The Future of Doctrine

The distinctive doctrinal feature of the Westminster Confession of Faith (henceforth WCF) is normally taken to be its Calvinism or, if you like, its Augustinianism. The noteworthy form taken by its Calvinism is the belief in the divine foreordination of all that happens, which in general refers to the entire providential order and in particular refers to the determination of the destinies of both the elect and the reprobate. Sometimes it is alleged that, while Calvin himself and the WCF held substantially the same position on this

[1] Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1909

matter, it all has a prominence in the WCF that it lacks in Calvin, a prominence that makes the doctrine of the divine decrees the cornerstone of the theological structure of the Confession. So it would seem that fidelity to the WCF in contemporary Presbyterianism entails at the least the adoption of its Calvinist understanding of predestination or foreordination.

Nevertheless, as a major contemporary commentator on post-Reformation Calvinism, Richard Muller, is anxious to point out and as, indeed, was pointed out ages ago by a classical commentator like Alexander Mitchell, it is a mistake to think that the WCF spins out its theology on the foundation of its understanding of divine foreordination. The foundation of theology in the WCF, in Calvinist dogmatics of the seventeenth century, and in Calvin himself, is Scripture. The first chapter of the Confession is 'Of the Holy Scripture' and we do not meet reference to the counsel and immutable will of God until chapter 2. '...In all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal to them [i.e., the Scriptures]'. (1.8). 'The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture' (1.10). Note 'all...councils'. It logically includes the Assembly's own theology, spelled out in the WCF. The first step taken by the divines was to relativize all other steps. They located authority outside their own Confession. Let us remember that, if ever an Assembly took care with its formulations, it was the Westminster Assembly. Further, the evidence is that they took particular care with this chapter. So the first and deliberate step taken by the Westminster divines was to deflect attention from the authority of their own Confession in the life of the Church and nation. The national context is important: the divines did their work under Parliament in the service of establishing a national Church. The stakes were very high indeed. The Code of the PCI reflects the view of Scripture taken by the divines, in describing Holy Scripture as the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and saying that it is not only our right and privilege, but our duty to bring doctrine to the

bar of Scripture. The obligation to be faithful to the WCF pales in comparison to the obligation to test the WCF by Scripture. If anyone denies that, they deny the foundational chapter of the WCF. While the WCF does not say, with the Scots Confession, that it would welcome correction at any point, from the Scriptures, there is no doubt that this is the position.

This point may seem so obvious that it is not worth making. But I think that it is. We need to grasp the radicalism of the principle in question. It was one of the Reformers' greatest gifts to the Church to encourage, from a logical point of view, the following principle: doctrine must be open, not closed. It fell to Calvin to imply this logic most clearly and systematically in Book 1 of the Institutes, dealing with Holy Scripture. Of course, the point must not be misunderstood. The Reformers were eager to show that they adhered to the mighty trinitarian and christological formulations of the early councils of the undivided Church. By 'doctrinal openness', I do not mean that the Reformers were saying that the Church was free to revise its belief in the incarnation, for example. But it is important to see why the Church has not that freedom. It is not ultimately because the doctrine of the incarnation is enshrined in the teaching of the Council of Chalcedon, or any Council, weighty and important as that one undoubtedly was. It is because incarnation is, they held, clearly taught in Scripture. Doctrinal openness means, then, openness to the teaching of Scripture, whatever Pope, Church, tradition, council...or WCF, may say.

Let me give an example of what applying this principle might mean, and give it not in order to provoke - which would be ungodly - but to relate the matter to the WCF in particular. In our century, renewed biblical exegesis forces us to think again about the doctrine of election - even if we conclude as did the Westminster divines. It may be held that (a) in the Old Testament, the community is elect, but this does not guarantee the salvation of individuals within it; (b) election is designed not to mark off a people ultimately for an exclusive privilege, but to be exclusively privileged for the sake of wider blessing; (c) one should understand the New Testament concept of the election of the Church in line

with the Old Testament notion of the election of Israel; (d) Romans 9-11, the locus classicus of the Calvinist theology of predestination, actually has little to say on the personal destiny of individuals (Esau personally may well have been saved, though he was not elect) and is concerned with the historical purposes of God. All of this may be contentious, and I am not directly interested right now in the doctrinal debate. What we must say is that on this understanding of things, the theology of the WCF would need to be adjusted, even though you might actually find yourself correcting the overall perspective of the Confession and adjusting, rather than denying, double predestination.[2]

Now, should the PCI feel free to do that? I believe that the divines would have opened their eyes wide with horror at such a question. The Church has an obligation to exercise such freedom...if it is convinced on a matter, by Scripture. If the divines thought that a Church three and a half centuries on was refusing to countenance putting their doctrine of election to a biblical test by doing its own exegesis, and felt bound a priori by the teaching of the Confession, they should have been deeply chagrined. They laboured hard in exegesis, using everything they knew about the text. They laboured to set us an example in labouring under the authority of Scripture, not to save us the trouble. With one voice they cry out to us: 'Your authority is not the results of our exegesis. It is sola Scriptura.'

Of course, this state of affairs, if it really obtains, is problematic. For it appears to mean that a Church committed to the WCF should feel free, in principle, to revise all of it, except, perhaps, chapter 1. Much could be said here that space does not permit me to say. So let us be blunt and brief. It seems to me that the WCF does commit us to the principle of willingness to revise. Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda - the truly Reformed Church must always go on being reformed and whatever the historical scope or reference of these words, we have no logical right to exempt doctrine from this process, within the Protestant

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[2] Though we shall not go here into how and why that might be the case.

communions. The Protestant quarrel with Rome is twofold: it is mistaken in it soteriology, and it shackles the Church with sources of authority that are supplementary to Scripture. It would be ironic if we appealed to the WCF to distance ourselves from the Roman Catholic (or other) communion, in such a way that we gave its teaching a binding and authoritative status in the life of the Church in exactly the way we criticize Rome (e.g.) for doing.

Some readers may be asking what my agenda is here. Am I out to do a hatchet job on the WCF? No. The agenda is clear and open. In our religious past, an English body framed a Confession of Faith for us. What is its future, specifically the future of its doctrine? I do not know; but I know the future that it ought to have. Our religious past ought to liberate the Church to do its own task of exegesis. If our exegesis leads us into uncertainty, so be it. God has not called us all to doctrinal certainty on everything all of the time, but to live in the light of his Word. If our exegesis leads us to question the conclusions of the divines, however exactly we should deal with such a situation formally in our Church, the divines would all say: 'Fine by us - if you read the Minutes of our meetings, you would see how much time we spent in questioning each other.' If our exegesis leads us to exactly the same conclusion as the divines, well and good - but let us persuade people on the relevant points out of Scripture, not just out of the Confession. Of course, we shall not be much of a match for the divines in their intellectual and theological abilities. But the Church learns new things from Scripture as the centuries roll on, and there is nothing arrogant in the little child perched on her father's mighty shoulders saying that she can see things which daddy can not.

The Future of Behaviour

.... Or the question of ethics. This year (1997) is the centenary of an extremely interesting set of lectures delivered by the eminent Scottish Free Church theologian, James Orr, subsequently published under the title, *The Progress of Dogma.*[3] Here, Orr maintained that the Church, in the course of her history, came to a

[3] London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1901

deeper understanding of particular doctrines at different times, not randomly, as though doctrinal insights in the Church have no logical progression, but according to a logical principle. So, e.g., the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation were worked out in some detail in the Early Church; the atonement and justification by faith in medieval times and the sixteenth century respectively (by Anselm and the Reformers), because Trinity and Incarnation are the basis of the doctrines of atonement and justification. In 1897, Orr thought that developments were to be expected in the Christian understanding of eschatology, but he concluded his volume by predicting that in the twentieth century, the most important theological developments would come not in doctrine, but in ethics. The main doctrinal positions may be modified, but not changed much; now, however, was the time for the Church to engage in

> '. . . another and yet more difficult task before it, if it is to retain its ascendency over the minds of men. That task is to bring Christianity to bear as an applied power on the life and conditions of society; to set itself as it has never yet done to master the meaning of "the mind of Christ," and to achieve the translation of that mind into the whole practical life of the age - into laws, institutions, commerce, literature, art; into domestic, civic, social, and political relations; into national and international doings - in this sense to bring in the Kingdom of God among men. I look to the twentieth century to be an era of Christian Ethic even more than of Christian Theology.' (p.353)

To this kind of suggestion, the divines, I am sure, would have been entirely hospitable.[4] Their main job - a tough one, brought about by a crisis in the question of the form of the Church in England - was to reform the Church as the Church of the nation. In their concern for the godly reformation of society, they were typically Calvinist, since such concern is arguably the heart and the distinctive feature of historical Calvinism. The fact that they had a

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[4] The divines might have conceded the logic of doctrinal openness in principle, but might also have been delighted with a thesis like that of Orr which would allow them to foreclose certain questions in practice!

responsibility which is not ours - to give form to a national Church - should not deflect our attention from the need to share their concern: the godly reformation of society under the Word of God. Of course, we live in a different religiously and morally pluralistic context, and we see the emergence of concern for socio-religious toleration at the time of the Westminster Assembly when the Independents found themselves beginning to argue for toleration. Our general social ambitions, however, are surely comparable and compatible.

When we come to Abraham Kuyper's work at the end of the last century (Kuyper was Professor of Theology at the Free University at Amsterdam prior to becoming Prime Minister in the Netherlands) we encounter an exceedingly robust and vigorous statement of the genius of Calvinism. Calvinism, Kuyper held, is the salvation of society, not by proclaiming a narrow gospel of individual redemption, but by striving for the glory of God in every known sphere of human activity.5 Whatever we make of Kuyper's thesis, in its principle or its detail, he is undoubtedly faithful to the broad vision shared by Calvin and the Westminster divines. Yet, for some reason, we have often proved much better at articulating our doctrinal positions than we have at articulating a social ethic that comprehends the whole business of life. Let me suggest four reasons why that is so. (This is not a profound or rigorous analysis of what I guess is a complex phenomenon. I am being highly selective.)

1. Our doctrine, and not our ethics, generally constitutes what is distinctive in the Reformed tradition...and we have concentrated on our distinctives. Calvinism has always claimed to be authentic Christianity. If that is the case, love for God and love for neighbour should be at the heart of Calvinism. Yet one is not likely to hear Calvinism defined in these terms, certainly not love for neighbour. Why not? Because Lutheranism, Catholicism, Liberal as well as evangelical theologies, may all say that the love of God is central. So may Judaism, Islam, certain strands of Hinduism and, as far as love for neighbour

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5 *Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943)

goes, irreligious humanists may say it too. This leads us to make, I believe, a big mistake. Because a certain belief is formally shared by the non-Reformed, we tend to marginalize it rather in our thinking. Yet love for neighbour, like love for God, is Christianly central and ought, therefore, to be Calvinistically central as well. Sadly, however, people associate Calvinism not with what is central to Christianity, but with what is distinctive to Calvinism. Now, of course, in Reformed perspective, Calvinist distinctives may be judged central to authentic Christianity. But the point is that what is undoubtedly central to Christianity- the love of neighbour - often gets short weight in Calvinism, because it is not, formally, one of the distinctives. Hence Christian social ethics, as the social outworking of love for God and neighbour, may receive comparatively little attention.

2. We are happier with what we regard as doctrinal certainties than with what we regard as ethically difficult areas. Medical ethics, e.g., raises profound issues about our humanity and in an intellectually vital area of social engagement because our medical structures and institutions, as we know, play an extremely important role in social formation. Yet anyone who has seriously entered the arena of medical ethical reflection will know how complex some of these issues are in Christian or any other perspective. Hence we are forced to live with intellectual uncertainties though we are also forced to act. And we find it easier, of course, to live with intellectual certainties. Now, of course, only some in the Church need engage with any particular set of issues, such as issues in medical ethics and I believe that we can have a legitimate certainty on some points of doctrine that eludes us on certain quandaries in ethics. Nevertheless, both as individual Christians and as a Church, we can not easily neglect the personal or collective task of working out some principles of social ethics on a good theological basis, and retreat, instead, to the security of what we take to be dogmatic certainties.
3. We frequently entertain unbalanced ideas of ministry and ministerial authority. Shortly after arriving in Northern Ireland

over three years ago, a short paper was passed on to me by a lapsed Presbyterian academic. His thesis was that Christianity is in crisis, because the world in which we live is very specialized, and the Church can not speak with authority in most of the areas in which human life is lived out. Several responses are possible to this challenge. Let us, however, acknowledge what is important in the point being made. It is quite true that the individual minister can not speak authoritatively on different areas, other than by setting forth broad biblical principles that should undergird our thinking and action - a task, however, that many lay persons can and should also be able to perform. The one we call 'minister' ought to release members of the body of Christ to do their own thinking about the sphere in which they are called to work. 'The sphere in which they are called to work'...one is not expecting church members to devise a comprehensive social ethic, just to think about the ethical issues in their sphere, exactly as they think so hard, so penetratingly and so willingly about their summer holidays, their children's schooling and the best way to dress in the choir. We are dealing here with some unfinished business of the Reformation and seventeenth century. The role of the laity (a word as infelicitous as the word 'minister') in the Church needs transformation, and we badly need this if the task of Christian ethics is to be undertaken properly.

4. This final point is made hesitatingly and tentatively, but I am taking the risk. Is it the case that excessive preoccupation with the political aspects of life in Northern Ireland is impeding the task of constructing a social ethic? In the past, rather more than in the present, I have been involved in the field of medical ethics. People outside Ireland, North and South, struggling to articulate and activate a perceived Christian position on euthanasia, abortion or genetic engineering, envy the situation in Ireland, where different socio-legal conditions obtain than is the case in other parts of Europe. But these people worry, for here law, instincts and public feeling - though some of this is rapidly changing - are in a relatively strong position to defend certain ethical principles in medicine. Yet the perception is that we

quarrel, divide, do not co-operate or offer limited co-operation, or are relatively indifferent in the battle. Social objectives are obscured by more narrowly political ones. Generally - and forgetting medicine in particular - it is as though a proportionately high level of intellectual energy gets discharged in relation to political conflict which, of course, is also literally a matter of life and death - high, that is, in proportion to the thought expended over the broader social area. Unionists may eventually succeed in politically securing the Union; Nationalists may eventually succeed in achieving a united Ireland. In either case, our social institutions and ethos could be a mess; and what does it profit us to gain our territory while the life-soul is drained out of the body politic? Our religious past will not have a bright future if we abnegate our socio-ethical responsibility.

It seems to me, though I can not dwell here on the reasons for believing this, that the credibility of Christianity in the future has a lot to do with our ability to frame and live by coherent social perspectives, ethics and policies. Certainly, its perceived socially oppressive nature is one of the main obstacles people have with Christianity. Now gospel and cross are indeed scandal and folly. But it would be a scandal if it were our folly that inhibited the Church from doing honour and justice to the name of Christ in the formation of socio-ethical thought.

The Future of Attitudes

John, in his first epistle, provides three tests of life: doctrinal, behavioural and attitudinal. Under the bland word 'attitude' I am referring to 'love'. It is to John that we owe the momentous sentence: 'God is love' (and, indeed, 'God is light'). What John has to say about love is almost unbelievable. '...If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us' (1 John 4.12). The love of Almighty God finds its temporal destiny in the human person, in the Christian Church. Think of it! Now although, in the johannine writings, the emphasis is chiefly on love for fellow-Christians, such love is obviously rooted in love for neighbour in a comprehensive sense, for we have been designed to be relational

individuals, not self-contained people who happen to relate to others. Our ontological constitution is essentially relational. So love is not like a tap that can be switched on and off. If it truly exists in the heart, its range is potentially unlimited.

When we speak of love, we - certainly I - should do so with some considerable embarrassment, since most of us are manifest failures. We avoid the clear teaching of Scripture about love as the test of whether, indeed, we have life. We frequently find the doctrinal test, and perhaps the test of externally correct behaviour, rather easier to pass. In the eighteenth century, G.E.Lessing wrote Nathan the Wise. A father makes a ring that has the property of making its owner beloved by God and fellow-humans. He gives it to one of his sons. But he has three sons, so he makes copies of the ring for the other two. The rings get passed down through the generations before a dispute breaks out about which descendant has the authentic ring. How can it be resolved? The creator of the ring can not be consulted and there is insufficient documentary evidence to establish the facts. There is no way of proving and telling who is right. No way? There is, of course, one way. The ring has the power of making its owner beloved by God and other human beings.

What was the point of the parable of the rings? There are three sons and there are three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Each claims divine foundation. No one can settle the dispute by producing some decisive evidence. God can not be interviewed on the matter. But you could prove the truth of your religion by your love. For love, Lessing thinks, is the quality in us which makes us beloved by God and our co-humanity.

It is interesting, over two hundred years after Lessing's play, to examine the writings of a figure like John Hick, a theologically radical philosopher of religion. Hick notices that several world religions emphasize the centrality of love. They seem to differ radically in their views on God or Ultimate Reality and it is difficult to settle some of the differences between them. So what about their performance, the track record of their love? According to Hick, as far as anyone can tell, there is little difference there too. In my judgement, there is a great deal wrong with Hick's argument. But he certainly pulls us up.

The importance of love, of course, can not easily be brought out in a Confession, though it may be easier to do so, in principle, in a Catechism. But we need to beware of the danger of thinking that because our religious past is marked in such a clear credal fashion, our religious future is secure, without acknowledging that love should dominate the Christian life. Love seems to be in terrifying recession. There is a desperate search on for love, the more desperate because often unacknowledged. In the nineteenth century, Arthur Schopenhauer argued that the sole root of all virtue and morality was love, which springs from us naturally in the form of compassion for those who suffer. He was opposed by the influential and violently anti-Christian, Nietzsche, who claimed that compassion is culturally engendered and conditioned. According to Nietzsche, the fundamental raw reality about humans is their will to maximize their own power. I fear that Nietzsche was largely right, certainly in relation to the male sex, and that his semi-predictions of a society which would get rid of God, then of objective morality, then of compassion, were uncannily accurate.

All this surely means that where, in our religious past, the seventeenth century divines concentrated on the structure of the Church and the gifts of the 'ministry' rather than the 'laity', we must - without neglecting those things - concentrate rather on the nature of the Church and the gifts to the whole body of Christ. Love, Paul tells the Colossians, binds into perfect unity (3.14). At least two things are entailed by our agenda.

1. Renewed interest in the congregational pattern of church life. I do not mean that Presbyterians should become Congregationalists, but we should attend to the congregational element within the Presbyterian tradition and within the biblical view of the Church. Patterns of mobility, work and leisure create a real problem for fostering a sense of congregational community both in cities and, now, often in rural areas. But surely we can not avoid making the attempt. The love which is a test of life is the sign of life primarily through the local congregation. Earlier, we touched on the transformation of social structures, but there are reasons to suppose that vital

congregational life is relatively far more effective in social transformation than we often think.

2. Renewed interest in the diversity of gifts in the Church. We have got into deep trouble with our notions of ministry. God gave the Church some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers. We, on the other hand, believe that God has lodged in one person the gifts of evangelist, pastor, teacher, not to mention administrator, youth leader etc. Not only do we require diversity in leadership; the fact is that the gifts of the Spirit are simply not given to one leader. They are given to the body, the Church, out of which some, with particularly relevant gifts, emerge as leaders. All this is pertinent as we speak of love, for love can only function effectively when we get a true sense of what we are and where we are in the body of Christ and its God-given diversity. Even more radical, I believe, than Paul's teaching on unity and on diversity, is his teaching on the equality of the members of the body (1 Corinthians 12.11ff implies it). None is more important than any other. And although, in saying this, we are emphasizing things not emphasized at the Westminster Assembly, we are unquestionably consistent with the divines and the Confession. The powerful Confessional emphasis on sovereign grace entails a radically egalitarian principle. Our ecclesiological past has a future if, and only if, we proceed to a view of the Church which emphasizes our third test of life and teases it out in the terms that I have suggested.

All this is, or should be, humdrum. No blueprint is on display. We are really speaking of the Church as the creature of the Spirit. When you look at the statistics of church growth and hear its story in contemporary times, you are struck by the rise of Pentecostalism, Neo-Pentecostalism, charismatic renewal and variations on these themes. It is an astonishing phenomenon and I admire anyone, be he or she for or against it, who can well understand what is going on. However we react to this phenomenon - favourably, unfavourably or mixed - it is unquestionably beneficial to have our minds turned to think about the Holy Spirit in

the Church (and, for that matter, in the world). One hears complaint that the Westminster Assembly omitted from its Confession any chapter on the Holy Spirit, but the complaint is, I believe, misplaced: the Puritans were great theologians of the Holy Spirit. What we must not do is to deny our religious past its future in the next millennium, by using it to block the path of the Spirit. I have in mind here no particular point in the past (at no juncture have I taken issue with the teaching of the Confession) but, rather, a particular relationship to the past. The divines strove to hear what the Spirit was saying to the churches in their day; we must do the same for ours.

If one is afraid of a destructively life-threatening gale force wind, it is wise to close the windows, seal the doors and block access. But to deny entry to any winds out of fear that they may blow some things away and change the atmosphere of the air, would be folly. The Spirit must blow where he wills. We must not fear the destruction of our foundations, for the builder of the house is God and his Spirit will not upset his building. He may, however, upset ours, which is a different matter. All this is trite enough. What is meant is this: the appropriation of our religious past must go hand in hand with, and be subordinate to, the living Lord who is the Spirit. If we deeply value our religious past, including the labours of the 'Assembly of the Lord', we will permit the Spirit to move in accordance with, beyond or in a different direction to it, as he wills. We should do so out of obedience to the same Lord obeyed by our illustrious forefathers.

Stephen N.Williams