

Doctrinal Development and Semper Reformata

Paul Mitchell

Please leave

In his Presidential Address to the 2019 Synod of the Diocese of Sydney Archbishop Glenn Davies tried to claim the doctrinal ‘high ground’ for the perspective taken by that Diocese in current debates about human sexuality and the ways in which the Anglican Church of Australia should engage with LGBTQIA+ people within church communities and the wider community. In that address Archbishop Davies suggested that his perspective was a purer version of Anglicanism and that those who sought to respond in other ways were trying to ‘change doctrine’ in unacceptable ways and therefore they should ‘leave’.

(https://www.sds.asn.au/sites/default/files/Presidential%20Address%202019%20%28final%29.pdf?doc_id=NDM4MDc=). That statement received considerable response and there was an attempt to modify its impact by suggesting that it only referred to ‘bishops’, though that qualification is spurious and disingenuous. (<https://www.ternitynews.com.au/australia/i-wanted-bishops-to-leave-not-lgbt-people-says-sydneys-glenn-davies/>)

There is a lot more going on though than simply a statement about attitudes towards homosexuality. This is part of a much longer and broader pattern of change which is being fomented BY the part of the church represented by Glenn Davies. It is disingenuous that he accuses others of trying to bring about change, when he and others of a similar mind are actually in a longstanding pattern of seeking to change the Anglican Church. Muriel Porter, an Australian Church historian, has accurately and comprehensively outlined this desired change in her book *The New Puritans: The Rise of Fundamentalism in the Anglican Church*. Noting that this was published in 2006 reveals that this is not a recent phenomenon. Matthew Payne, in an article published very recently on his blog site (<http://stretchtheology.com/why-the-best-anglicans-are-also-puritans>) reveals that it seems the hierarchy of the Anglican Church in Sydney may even have decided to ‘own’ this designation as Puritans. Payne is engaged in writing his PhD on William Perkins, a 16th Century Puritan. Payne suggests that “Perkins was a ‘puritan’, meaning that he sought to continue the English Reformation by trying to bring English Christianity further in line with the Bible.”

What Payne, and the Sydney Diocesan hierarchy are not admitting is that the changes which they seek to bring about in the Anglican Church reflect a particular interpretation of the Bible, one which is not aligned with classic or contemporary Anglicanism. In the article suggesting ‘the best Anglicans are also puritans’ Payne misrepresents the opposition of both Richard Hooker (who was contemporaneous with Perkins and whose work in the 16th century provided the ground for Anglican Theology) and the work of Muriel Porter. The opposition which is made by Hooker and Porter and most contemporary Anglicans to ‘puritanism’ (particularly as expressed by the hierarchy of the Diocese of Sydney) is not based in arguments over ceremonial or superficialities but is grounded in serious and significant theological differences.

Some of these significant issues will be explored here, but they include issues of Ecclesiology and Theology of the Nature of God and well as this issue of human sexuality which is part of a Theology of the Human Person.

Responses

The response to the suggestion by Davies that those who disagree with him should 'leave' was swift and international. These responses, both from within the church and from commentators from the surrounding community, have focussed on various aspects of Davies' argument and suggestions. The comments below necessarily draw broad brush depictions of the responses made.

In the wider community:

- Some who support the changes to the Marriage Act which have allowed persons of the same biological gender to marry ('same-sex marriage') are disturbed that the Anglican Church is failing to 'get on board' with changes in society and resisting what a majority of people in Australia now accept. For some people responding from this perspective the comments from Davies reinforce the idea that the church is becoming increasingly irrelevant and that such standpoints will continue its demise.
- Some who continue to oppose the changes to the Marriage Act, but who do not identify as Christian, welcome Davies standing up for 'traditional values'. Andrew Bolt is a regular columnist and commentator who takes this position. Though Bolt writes from within a particular church perspective he writes to influence and resonates with this wider group. While many are not wanting to engage with the church in any real way, they deplore the loss of the church as it was, a stable influence in society where basic values were taught. The loss of this stability, in the church and more broadly in Australia, is blamed on influence from 'the left', 'the Greens', radicals who have disrupted 'our' community.

Within the Church community:

- Outside of the Anglican Church and among some Protestant denominations Davies' comments have been applauded as a timely recalling to 'the truth'. He is seen as a champion for Reformation values which need to be heeded for the church to remain faithful. Relevance to the wider community is not valued highly by those from this perspective who agree with Davies. Their understanding of the church as a counter-cultural movement is expressed by opposition to anything which does not align with their interpretation of the word and mind of God. This perspective includes those who consider that the Reformation, initiated 500 years ago, is not yet complete. 'We', church and society, have not yet been sufficiently obedient to God in reforming our lives and the expression of our relationship with God through the church. This is a renewed Puritan perspective which found political expression in England in the 17th century during what they would call the 'Commonwealth', led by Oliver Cromwell. This perspective appears to be being revealed more and more as the position of the hierarchy of the Diocese of Sydney. From this perspective the narrower definition of the nature of society and the church is a goal still to be achieved. Those who reject both the political movement of the Puritans and their influence in the Church of England refer to that time as the 'Interregnum'. Importantly those who reject that Puritan influence are clear that this was an aberration and not the true expression of what has become the worldwide Anglican Communion.
- There are other voices outside the Anglican Church, particularly among members of the Uniting Church who support the ways in which that denomination has embraced LGBTQIA+ people, who have been appalled at Davies' comments, encouraging those at whom Davies' comments were directed to maintain their opposition to Sydney Diocese and its narrow conservatism. Some have also encouraged those who feel they must follow Davies' direction

and 'leave' to find a new home in the Uniting Church! From this perspective (and a view shared by people beyond any church affiliation) the comments by Davies are a continuation of the persecution of LGBTQIA+ people, belittling them as if they were 'an issue' and rejecting any perspective on human sexuality beyond a binary male/female (with expression of even that sexuality only allowed within narrow constraints).

- The voices from within the Anglican Church reflect the growing divide between those places where the neo-Puritan perspective of the Diocese of Sydney is gaining ground and those where other influences continue to shape the patterns of the life of the Church.
- Some conservative Anglo-Catholic voices cautiously applaud the desire of Davies that radical theological liberals should leave the Anglican Church. These voices would also support Sydney Diocese's continuing rejection of validity of the ordination of women but their support for Davies will be muted and cautious because they also realise that on the vast majority of other issues in the life of the church they also disagree strongly with the rising neo-Puritanism.
- In those places where clergy have been trained at Sydney's Moore Theological College (or at Melbourne's Ridley College during the past decade) the comments from Davies have been welcomed and supported. In these places, among these clergy, and in the communities which continue to be shaped by this neo-Puritan theological perspective what Davies is speaking is the truth. The Anglican Church, as they understand it, needs to be purified from the corrupting influences of liberal theology and those who (as far as they are concerned) listen more to calls for change from the wider community than they listen to God. While few of these clergy and communities can accurately be called 'fundamentalist' or 'Biblically-literalist' their perspective on the Bible and the Word of God is shaped significantly by the narrow frame provided by John Calvin, one of the prominent and conservative Continental Reformers. This neo-Calvinism is not particularly new as a conservative perspective within the Anglican Church.

The call to holiness of life, desire to live faithfully in relationship with God, and the impetus to share the word of God so that people will hear the Word and be saved through faith and acceptance of a real and living relationship with Jesus are all aspects of a mature Christian life into which we are invited. Actually, in various ways, all of these calls will be recognised across the whole of the Church as essential aspects of being a faithful Christian.

The differentiation and divergence in the Diocese of Sydney can be traced, however, across the past century. A critical appointment in 1959 at Moore Theological College set the trajectory though for the current divergence. When Broughton Knox was appointed at Principal at Moore College he began to teach more forcefully the neo-puritan perspectives on faith and the life of the church which are now expressed among this group who applaud and welcome Davies' comments. Knox taught ideas which have become doctrines which are accepted in Sydney and among the group of like-minded people. There is significant irony in that Davies rails against those who 'seek to change doctrine' while he serves as the Archbishop of a Diocese in which doctrinal change has been promoted officially, changes which seek to alter our understandings of the nature of the church and even the nature of God!

- There are many Anglicans from across Australia and around the world who have been deeply distressed by Davies' comments. The distress is expressed in many ways. For those who heed the calls in the Bible to maintain unity the calls for schism are unfaithful to God's desire for the Church. For those within the Anglican Church who identify as LGBTQIA+ this is yet

another instance of a church leader persecuting them for something which is part of their nature, who they are, who (as they and many others believe) God has created them to be. For those who support acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people and who see ungodly barriers and prejudice in Davies' comments this is an example of outrageous and destructive ignorance, perpetuating an unreasoning fixation on ways of thinking which have been transformed by the ongoing application of our God-given reasoning capacity, a capacity, the application of which, is part of the Anglican way of seeking faithful understanding of God, ourselves, the church and the world. In the Anglican approach to theology Scripture, Tradition and Reason are three legs providing a basis for a faithful approach to all of life.

Three issues under development

The ways in which the hierarchy of the Diocese of Sydney seek to change doctrine and shape it along more puritan expressions include, as noted above Ecclesiology, the Nature of God and Understanding of the Human Person. It is true that Doctrine within the Church is always in a state of change and development. For this development to be faithful, reasonable and justifiable requires careful attention, time and a generosity of spirit among those who are engaging with shifts in the previously accepted paradigms. Thomas Kuhn has blessed us in the church and in broader society with his important work on paradigm shifts, explored in the several editions of his ground-breaking work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Within the Church we need also to heed the significant work undertaken by Anglican Theologian John Henry Newman (before he decided to become a member of the Roman Catholic Church) on *The Development of Doctrine*. There is no modern analysis as yet which continues Newman's work and reflects the challenges and changes which have faced the Anglican Church, and other parts of the Church, in the last century, yet the principles outlined by Newman, based in the work of Richard Hooker and the threefold approach to the task of Theology, have undergirded the changes which have been made.

Understanding of the Human Person

A key matter to grasp in trying to understand the position taken by the hierarchy of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, and those who take a similar position, is that their opposition to any acceptance of homosexuality, homosexual practice, transgender acceptance and any of the range of descriptions of the human condition expressed in the acronym LGBTQIA+, is that this is nothing personal. They are not attacking the persons, even though it will have often felt like that. Their opposition comes from their definition of what constitutes true 'human nature'. This, as a theological understanding, is the nature which comes from God as gift and, importantly, reflects the nature of God, as humanity is made 'in the image of God'. This human nature is defined as exclusively binary. Male and female. That binary nature is expressed and shown through differing physical bodies in men and women. The only valid expression of human nature is to be a man or to be a woman. The only appropriate way in which intimate and sexual relationships can be a valid expression of human nature is between a man and a woman, and the expression of that relationship is further constrained within the validation of commitment through authorised and recognised marriage.

A recent pronouncement from the Church of England (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/23/sex-married-heterosexual-couples-church-of-england-christians>) could be seen to reflect and support this restriction of what is valid and infer

agreement with this limited theology of the human person. That statement comes in a context of increasing acceptance of diverse relationships and the struggle of the Church of England, as the 'established church' in England, to respond to changes in the Acts of Parliament there regarding civil unions and partnerships. Clergy who oppose same-sex unions do not want, through the provisions governing the Church of England AS the 'established church' in England, to be forced to preside at such unions. The way in which the statement has been received, focussing on what is 'acceptable' in sexual relations, does suggest that human nature is being defined there in narrow and binary terms.

Why does this matter? It is because for those who want to be faithful to the Bible, as it is understood in those parts of the Church, 'nature' matters. What is part of human nature AND is blessed by God is to be accepted and encouraged. The 'fallen' aspects of human nature, which reflect essentially rebellion against God and are at the heart of what is called 'sin', are to be opposed, condemned and avoided. The phrase 'love the sinner and hate the sin' allows for a person to be embraced as they are in the process of repenting of falling into sin, of expressing in their lives the fallen-ness of human nature. Beyond this there are also those things which are considered 'unnatural' and for these conditions, attitudes and behaviours in humanity there is a more strident and forceful opposition. To love and accept a repentant sinner and to embrace those who 'fall short' (as Paul notes to the Romans that we all do Romans 3:23) as we seek to be faithful to God is seen by those who take a narrow binary view of human nature as being an acceptable path. To embrace and accept those who behave 'contrary to nature' (as expressed in Romans 1:26) is a completely different matter.

Embracing those who act and live 'contrary to nature' is thought to be an act of unfaithfulness to God. Homosexuality and ANYTHING outside of binary male/female self-understanding or expression is interpreted as being 'contrary to nature'. This is not personal. It is a matter of faith. As people who hold this view will say, they oppose everything that LGBTQIA+ reflects because they are concerned for the ultimate state of the soul of the people who hold such positions. As attitudes, behaviours and self-understandings which are contrary to nature they can never be accepted or condoned or allowed to become acceptable. This perspective is, for such people, fundamentally about faithfulness to God.

Clearly it is not only in the wider community of society but also within the Church that there are people who hold different views. Grace Cathedral in San Francisco USA published a response to the statement from the Bishops of the Church of England (<https://gracecathedral.org/responding-church-englands-statement-civil-partnerships/>), signed by many people including their Diocesan Bishop. That statement included the words:

“The rightness of a sexual act does not depend on the gender of those engaged in it but in the love, respect and honoring of the self and other that they bring to the act.

Those whom God created lesbian, gay, trans, bi, straight, intersex, asexual all bear the image of the God who is beyond gender and are all equally called to loving, nurturing, intimate relationships and to the service of God in the Church and world.”

This expresses a very different understanding of human nature and the way in which such nature may be expressed in people's lives. The response focussed on 'sexual acts' because this was the popularly scandalous feature of the statement to which the response was made. Yet it is not really about 'sex'. This is about who we are, who God has created us to be, how we understand what is 'natural'.

Throughout recorded human history there have always been expressions of same sex attraction and sexual intimacy. Any thorough study of ancient art and ancient reveals this. It is true that some of these expressions reflect manipulative, coercive and destructive behaviour as well as ritualised sex in religious and other aspects of human society. To confuse such expressions with the self-understanding which is revealed in embracing of LGBTQIA+ is to make the same fundamental mistake as those who confuse homosexuality and paedophilia. While there have been societal pressures and constraints in some places around public acceptance of same-sex or other than binary relationships it is only in the last few hundred years that such constraints have become prohibitions, laws resulting in often severe punishments and abhorrent practices like ‘conversion therapy’. There seems to have been an increasing violence towards those who fit outside of what some consider to be an acceptable ‘norm’.

The work of Alfred Kinsey to understand human sexuality, while treated critically by some, has broadened understanding of the diversity of the human condition. At the same time as Kinsey’s work began to be more widely considered the American Psychological Association came under increasing pressure to review its attitude towards homosexuality, and eventually removed this from a list of mental illnesses. Understanding of what it means to be human, how we understand ourselves and how we interact has continued to grow and this research, along with personal experience among those who have lobbied for change, has led to deep changes in Western societies regarding same sex attraction and expression and LGBTQIA+ issues overall. In an increasing number of countries, now including Australia, this has led to increasing legal recognition of relationships beyond a narrow binary model.

Within Church communities this has become a much debated and deeply researched issue over the past 70 years. It is clear that there are parts of the Bible in which there appears to be condemnation of same-sex relationships. The recent collection of papers published by the Anglican Church of Australia (<https://anglican.org.au/our-work/doctrine-theology/>), and earlier monographs (including Five Uneasy Pieces and responses to that work) explores differing understanding of these passages.

For those whose understanding of human nature is that it is exclusively binary the passages are clear and condemn any acceptance of self-understanding or behaviour beyond that nature. For others all of these passages reflect particular situations and other circumstances which have been, unfairly and inappropriately, taken and used to oppose more open attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ people. For example, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is seen as being actually about hospitality and the way that society functioned at that time; passages which condemn homosexual acts were really directed at cultic expressions and practices among the people who were enemies of the people of Israel; and some passages are seen as misunderstandings or mistranslations. To provide a very different perspective the close relationship between David and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:26 Jonathans love was, for David “more wonderful than that of women”) is suggested for reflection. From this perspective it is suggested that the Bible does NOT really condemn homosexuality, only certain intimate acts in particular circumstances.

An alternative perspective, which begins to address the position taken by the neo-puritans, comes from an Australian Theologian, Bill Loader. (see ‘Same-Sex Relationships: A First Century Perspective’. <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LoaderSameSex.pdf>). Loader agrees with the puritans that Paul, at least, IS criticising homosexuality in nature and practice. Loader argues that Paul, as a man of his time, only understood human nature as heterosexual. Paul was, therefore, critical of homosexual practice as something ‘un-natural’, against the nature of the person, as he

understood human nature. The critical question though is whether Paul understood rightly, accurately, and whether that is truth for all time. It can be argued that in this, and in other matters, Paul (and other Biblical writers) was limited by his time and the knowledge available in that day. There are many things which we now understand far more fully and deeply than were understood in the first century AD, and before.

To challenge Paul's interpretation challenges ways of receiving the Biblical texts and the lens through which this may be interpreted. This is another important matter but not explored further here except to note that among the neo-puritans the latitude which is allowed for reinterpretation of Biblical texts is very narrow. Accumulating human knowledge is given less weight than historical interpretations. Remembering Hooker's three legged stool the great danger in such an approach is to rely on a stout leg of Scripture, a narrowly defined interpretation of Tradition and such little application of 'Reason' that the stool is unbalanced.

Is 'human nature' truly only binary? Genetics disagrees. Psychology disagrees. Human experience disagrees. Reading of the Bible with eyes open to new knowledge also disagrees. So, should our Doctrine and the practice of the Church be limited to a binary understanding of human nature, or should we explore, from a broader perspective, what faithfulness to God looks like from a broader understanding?

Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology is the Theology of the Church, in theory and practice. It is about how we understand what it means to be the Church and how we live that out. In this area of the life of the Anglican Church the neo-puritans are seeking to continue and embed some significant changes. In the late 15th and early century Desiderius Erasmus produced a new version of the Bible in Latin, based on and along with a compilation of the best available Greek and Hebrew texts at that time. This translation guided the Protestant Reformation in many ways and some of the mistakes which Erasmus made had a significant effect on theological developments. One particular mistake which Erasmus made was picked up by William Tyndale, also working in the early 16th century. Erasmus translated the Greek work 'ekklesia' into Latin as 'congregatio'. Tyndale took his lead and used the word 'congregation' in his English translation, an important work which significantly influenced the scholars who produced the King James Bible, the Authorised Version, at the beginning of the 17th century. 'Ekklesia' is the work for Church and so this translation matters. Erasmus, Tyndale and many of the Protestant Reformers developed their understanding of Church based on the limitation of its real substance to its local expression. This was further developed and narrowed in the views of the puritans, a point of significance for the current dilemma regarding the neo-puritans in the Anglican Church. Broughton Knox, Principal of Moore Theological College in the Diocese of Sydney from 1959 to 1985, was puritan in his understanding of the Church. He taught what has become the Doctrine of the Church in that Diocese, that the church only really exists in its local manifestation and really only exists when the church is 'gathered' in worship. Everything beyond that is organisational structure. Everything beyond the local existence of the church is useful for administration and cooperation but is not truly 'church'.

This has many ways in which this Doctrine is expressed and lived. In such an understanding 'bishops' are little more than managers, administrators, with a responsibility to make sure everyone follows agreed rules. Glenn Davies, who retires in 2020 as Archbishop of Sydney, is the third man

to hold that position who has been significantly influenced by the views of Knox and who, before ascending to that office, downplayed its significance. The crux here is whether we are a broadly based family with deep connections to one another, under God, and called into respect and shared mutual ministry, or whether we are, as local manifestations of the church, only in loose association with one another.

Disregard for the ways in which the Anglican Church has understood ministry and the structuring of the Church over the past 500 years, drawing as it did on the previous 1500 years as well, the neo-puritans seek to change the ways in which local leadership is also expressed. Preaching, which is focussed primarily on presentation of 'propositions' which need to be learned and accepted' is seen as the primary charism. The minister is, most importantly of all, a teacher. As such the other roles usually embodied in leadership in congregations are downplayed and shared with less regard for any representational or coordination role. An important aspect of this trajectory has been the development of 'lay presidency' in the Diocese of Sydney. This is despite clear and frequent direction by the highest councils of the Anglican Church in Australia that such an innovation disrupts Anglican order and understanding of ministry. Lay people, men only, have been allowed to lead services of Communion in church communities in the Diocese of Sydney for decades. Whether or not this is a change which should be further considered it IS a significant change to Anglican practice and understanding of the nature of Church and ministry.

Nature of God

As significant as, arguably more than, the other theological novelties which come from the neo-puritan direction of the Diocese of Sydney is their desire to change the way in which we understand God. The theological label for their doctrinal novelty is 'subordinationism'. Both that theological expression and its development into Doctrine in the Diocese of Sydney are explored in Kevin Giles (2002) The Trinity and Subordinationism. 'Subordinationism' suggests that within God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, there exists a hierarchy. The Holy Spirit is inferior, subordinate to the Son (Jesus) and the Son is subordinate to the Father. This challenges and undermines understandings of God which have been held by the Church, beyond the Anglican Church of course, throughout the world across at least the past 16 centuries. Creating a hierarchy in this way not only changes substantially the ways in which we may see God, as we experience God, but it makes the 'three-in-one'-ness of God less tenable. If there is a hierarchy then there is not one God expressed and experienced as Trinity. There are, instead, three gods. As a theological novelty it undermines not only basic Anglican understanding but the breadth of Christian understanding of God.

There is a particular reason for the development of this theology though, which relates to the implications which are then drawn about humanity by having a hierarchy in the nature of God. If God is hierarchically arranged, then so is or may be humanity. It is for THIS reason that the neo-puritans in the Diocese of Sydney both promote the idea of male 'headship' and oppose the ordination of women as priests/presbyters (which would place them in positions where they had a teaching role and therefore authority over men).

Men are higher in the hierarchy and are therefore to be obeyed, both by the women in the communities and congregations where they serve in leadership and in their families by their wives and daughters. The pernicious and damaging expression of this idea of 'headship' was seen in the sad revelations in recent years that there were many wives of male priests in the Diocese of Sydney

who had been abused and even subject to violence. Their courage in managing to speak out against this abuse was met, from those in significant leadership in that Diocese, by silence, opposition and the requirement that they be silent, return to their husbands and be obedient. The theology of subordinationism has been used to justify this behaviour and response by the male leaders.

It could be argued that there is nothing ‘new’ in such attitudes, given historical attitudes and practices in Western societies. Remember, with sadness, that the ‘rule of thumb’ governed the acceptable thickness of branches which husbands were allowed to use to beat recalcitrant wives! The question which should be asked though is whether such practices should be in any way condoned or accepted now, and whether any theology which undergirds and sustains the attitudes which allow ‘headship’ to continue to be taught and supported have any place in the life of the Church.

Developing Doctrine

‘Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei’ was a statement by the reforming churches from the 16th centuries. ‘The Church, reformed, and always being reformed, according to the Word of God’. This is a laudable and important trajectory for the Church, throughout the world and within each part of the Anglican Church. Yet how should this be undertaken? Should it be taking into account all that we continue to learn of ourselves, of our world, of human nature, of the lessons of the darkest of human interactions from the distant and recent past? Should scientific inquiry have any role? Many of us in the Anglican Church and other parts of the ‘Church catholic and universal’ are seeking ongoing development of Doctrine, with a broad openness to all of the knowledge into which God has led us. We seek to apply that classical model of exploring all three of Scripture, Tradition and Reason. What frustrates and deeply disturbs us though is the fundamentally different way in which doctrinal development is being sought and undertaken by the neo-puritans. We all seek change. But what change and how?

Neo puritans are not as Payne suggested them to be “trying to bring ... Christianity further in line with the Bible.” These are people for whom the Reformation was never quite finished. The 17th century restitution of the monarchy and the settlement thereafter for the church derailed what they believe should have continued, the complete reformation of the church on puritan lines. That is what they now seek to pursue. Their agenda is not a leap into God’s future but a leap backwards into a past within narrowly defined and controlled ideas about God, humanity, the world and the Church.

Unless and until we can admit the different agendas there will continue to be disturbing skirmishes within the Anglican Church which ultimately debilitate us in BEING the Church, the community through which the light and love and invitation of God shines and in which and through which God’s invitation into relationship is experienced.

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Please share these thoughts. May they encourage broader debate about the mess in which we find ourselves as the Anglican Church of Australia and foster deeper clarity about the choices before us as we seek to be faithful to God.