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Heresy and Schism

Church history abounds with episodes of heresy and schism, and our present history is no different. The Episcopal Church suffers from both. But before addressing these, a degree of definition might be helpful. What are heresy and schism?

Heresy is a sin against the truth as it is taught in the doctrine of the historic Catholic Church, and of course by Catholic I mean universal. Whenever someone knowingly denies the teaching of the church, he repudiates the church's mission of salvation. To undermine any of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, the Trinity, the Incarnation, or the Atonement, is to undermine the gospel. It is the knowledge of the truth of the gospel that sets us free. Heresy is therefore a grave and heinous sin.

Schism is different from heresy. While heresy is a sin against the truth, schism is a sin against charity. Often people say that schism is a sin against unity, and this is correct if the idea of unity means the bond of charity. The unity of the church is not just any kind of unity, like that based on political interest or social convention or common opinion. Only the love of God binds the true Church together. For any one willfully to bear a grudge, and more seriously to attempt to undermine for giveness and reconciliation and peace in the Body of Christ is to become schismatic. Like heresy, schism is a grave and heinous sin.

These two attributes, Truth and Charity, are both essential to the Church of God. Essential because they are aspects of our participation in the very life of God which is given us in Christ Jesus. Truth and charity are not optional. Eternal life consists in the knowledge of God, and only on the basis of knowing Jesus and loving Him can we obey Him.

The Episcopal Church presently finds itself plagued with both heresy and schism. The denial of the divinity of Christ and of the doctrine of the Trinity make nonsense of the doctrine of the Atonement. Such denials can be found in the writings of bishops and professors of Theology.

Willful disregard for charity manifests itself in the relations of some bishops to their clergy as well as to their parishes. And I have no doubt that there is sometimes a reciprocal animus on the part of some clergy and parishes in relation to their bishops.

As long as there is an authentic intention to stay within both truth and charity, the communion of fellowship in the Lord may continue. But what happens when we are confronted with the loss both of truth and of charity? Then we have the gravest situation of all: *apostasy*. Apostasy means that one has repudiated the Body of Christ and can no longer be considered Christian in any meaningful sense.

In some areas of the Episcopal Church, parishes find themselves in dioceses where the bishops speak and act as if they are apostate. They would claim otherwise. They still wear the same vestments and they may even say the Nicene Creed, but whether they believe in the Trinity and in the divinity of Christ are questions. They have been unable to persuade their more astutely theological parishes otherwise.

Add to this that these bishops persecute parishes that remain faithful to the truth and charity of the gospel as it is revealed in Christ, and you have profound heresy and deep schism.

Such a situation may have developed in Accokeek, Maryland, at historic Christ Church, which was established in 1698. This past year Christ Church called the Rev'd. Dr. Samuel Edwards to be their Rector. Suffragan Bishop Jane Dixon has refused him the proper papers of Institution. Why? Dr. Edwards has met every qualification needed for this calling. Mrs. Dixon has opposed Dr. Edwards simply because he is orthodox. As with Christian tradition, and the great catholic bodies of the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches, he cannot accept the ordination of women. Moreover, he has written and spoken against the growing apostasy, (heresy and schism) in the Episcopal Church. In every other respect he is a faithful educated Christian priest who is called to preach

and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ. He just will not roll over and play dead for the political hierarchy. And the parish of Christ Church supports him.

Mrs. Dixon has ordered the parish's vestry to cease allowing Dr. Edwards to preach and celebrate Holy Communion. They refused. Now a quite serious and important act has taken place.

Because of the actions of Mrs. Dixon, and because Dr. Edwards was a priest in good standing in the diocese of Fort Worth, The Bishop of Fort Worth, Jack Iker, has declared Christ Church, Accokeek, Maryland to be under his jurisdiction. This means that a bishop from one diocese (Fort Worth) has intervened in the jurisdiction of another bishop (Washington, D.C.).

Now bishops of all pedigrees are involved, conservative, liberal, and moderate. Charges of canonical violations are whirling in all directions. As in the words of Isaiah, *The whole head is sick and the whole heart faint. What will be the outcome?*

There are other situations similar to these. Our mends in several parishes in Philadelphia are hard pressed by their bishop. Two have already left the Episcopal Church. Other parishes around the country have left for other churches. The newly formed Church, Anglican Mission in America, which is constituted through the Anglican dioceses of Rwanda and Southeast Asia, has just consecrated bishops for work here in the United States.

What is the future of the Episcopal Church? God knows. Our work is to sit still, to pray in the hope of charity, and to listen to the truth of Christ Jesus.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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