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The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion - In Crisis - Part I

Our beloved communion is in real trouble. With the passage of same-sex unions in the Diocese of New Westminster, Vancouver, with the election of a practicing homosexual, previously married and with children, as Bishop in the Diocese of New Hampshire, and with the appointment of a Bishop at Reading (Oxford), England, who has a past of homosexual activity and is currently an advocate for the rights of those who practice the same, we Anglican Christians find ourselves at a crossroads that we simply cannot deny or ignore.

But before I begin this series and delve into arguments that I think we must consider, I want to say what might be more appropriate for an ending rather than a beginning. I want you to know where I stand.

I believe in the love of God and the love of neighbor with all my heart. There are people in my past and present who practice homosexuality whom I consider the dearest of friends. I love and admire them, and they know it. I do not, however, endorse their behavior. And they know that too. Just as I consider my own faults sinful and worthy of God's judgment, so do I consider theirs. We are all, each one, saved only by the blood of the Lamb. His blood covers all our sin; both what we know is wrong and what we do in ignorance.

These are my beliefs and feelings, deeply felt and honestly believed. But what I believe and feel is not finally the point.

What is the point is the revealed truth of our religion and the wisdom of our tradition. Neither my opinion nor those of others amounts to a hill of beans apart from the Word of God. No matter how many testimonies one may gather for the pros or cons of homosexual behavior, no matter how much civil legislation is passed, no matter how many opinions are written by the courts of our nation, there is prior to and above all of these an objective truth about human sexuality that measures and defines the whole debate, and it is found in the Holy Scriptures.

This is where I stand, in the Christian tradition which declares that moral truth is supremely revealed in the Bible. This is, in root and stem, the tradition derived from Christ Jesus. God has spoken, and he has spoken definitively in his Son. He is himself the very unity of the Bible. His Lordship governs the Christian tradition, and so it is our calling as Christians to pray for the grace to learn his teaching and to

obey his will. All pastoral care and all church discipline derive their authority from him. It is there that I take my place, not in my own opinions, but in the grace of that Incarnate Word.

So much for where I stand. What is the current state of the church? We are seriously at odds. The communion is actually divided. Already the Archbishop of Sydney, Australia, has written that his dioceses are not in communion with those who are part of, or advocates for, the developments cited above. The Anglican Church of Nigeria, the home of eighteen million Anglican Christians (the Episcopal Church numbers two and one-half million) has condemned the same developments, calling the actions heretical. Closer to home, the Bishop and Bishop Suffragan of South Carolina have called on the Episcopal Church not to ratify the election of the Bishop elect in New Hampshire, but care-fully to bring these matters under the clear authority of Scripture.

There have been other statements as well. The Archbishop of Canterbury has said that the appointment of the Bishop of Reading followed a process in which assurances were made that the Bishop designate does not presently violate any of the present policies of the Church of England. Furthermore, the Archbishop made it clear that this appointment was not a unilateral act (which he has deplored) on the part of the Church of England, nor was it an attempt to subvert current discipline or foreclose future discuss-ion.

With respect to our own diocese, the Bishop of Georgia has directed our attention to the recent deliberations of the meeting of the Bishops in Province IV, of which the Diocese of Georgia is a part. These Bishops voted unanimously for a resolution asking the General Convention not to pass legislation on the issue of same-sex marriage. They believe prayerful reflection and theological deliberation are the way forward. On the election of a practicing homosexual as Bishop of New Hampshire, our Bishop has not yet said anything officially.

The two most important statements on the issues of same-sex unions and the ordination of practicing homosexuals have come from the recent meeting of the Primates of the Anglican Communion in Brazil and the Report of the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church.

The Primates declared that because our liturgy expresses what we believe, and further, because there is no theological consensus about same-sex unions, the Primates, as a body, cannot support the authorization of such rites. They do, of course, commend attention to individual pastoral care.

The Theology Committee of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church is not so clear. In fact the statement of the House of Bishops is logically flawed and inherently confused. While acknowledging the traditional teaching of the Scripture and the Church, the Bishops go on to list various opinions of all sorts and conditions, all of which, for them, carry an equal weight. They have, therefore, no means by which they can discover the validity of these opinions. Indeed, for them, the Scripture itself is reduced merely to how people interpret it. The document ends with this admission, "We have prayed, studied and discussed these issues, and we are unable to reach a common mind on the scriptural, theological, historical, and scientific questions that are raised. There is much that we do not understand."

The statement of the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops is logically flawed and inherently confused because of their theological method. The Christian Church has always, at all times, and in all places, understood the truth of God to be authoritatively revealed and given in the Word of God, passed on to subsequent generations in sacred tradition, and articulated by illumined reason. These, taken together, are the measure of proffered opinions. Scripture, tradition, and reason are the work of God the Holy Ghost. And he does not contradict himself. His words mean what they say. So then, let us begin with the Word of God and consider the various arguments. The Sword is drawn.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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