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The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.34 No.33

The Fourth Sunday after Trinity

07/13/03

The Episcopal Church and The Anglican Communion - In Crisis - Part II

I had intended to consider in this article what the Holy Scriptures say about the practice of homosexuality, and through the light of Scripture measure the various arguments for such practice. But that will have to wait. I want to bring you up to date on the current crisis. News comes recently both from the Church of England and from the Episcopal Church in the United States. It is news worth considering.

In England, the bishop designate of the Diocese of Reading, who has lived with a male partner for twenty-seven years, but who claims that theirs is no longer a sexually active relationship and that he is now celibate, has withdrawn his acceptance. According to the London Times, the Archbishop of Canterbury and other leaders of the church had a six-hour meeting with the new designate. After spending a long period of time crafting a brief letter of withdrawal, the letter was signed and the meeting adjourned.

It is the contention of the Archbishop that this action took place in the interest of the unity of the church. The story in the London Times claims that the Arch-bishop was forced to act by the threat of wealthy evangelical parishes diverting

money away from the diocese. It is possible to believe that both motives contributed to the bishop designate's withdrawal. Whatever the causes were, the right and good thing was done.

The news from the Episcopal Church comes in a letter from the Presiding Bishop. His views run along the same lines as those of the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops. He states that there are a variety of opinions on the recent election of the Bishop of New Hampshire, a practicing homosexual who left wife and children for his male partner. While the Presiding Bishop says that this variety of opinion should not surprise us, he calls for us to respect all views.

And then Bishop Griswold commits himself to an interesting turn of mind. In the midst of the swamp of varied opinion he throws himself upon the old familiar stump of sophistry. He writes, "I hope that a distinction can be made between the consent to the consecration of a bishop who is a priest in good standing partnered with a member of the same sex, and the continuing debate regarding formal actions by the church in the area of human sexuality. We as bishops, together with our diocesan deputations, need to keep our eyes fixed on the

larger purposes for which we gather as a church,

namely the enduring mission of God in Christ who has reconciled all things to himself through the cross."

In other words, the Presiding Bishop is for the consent of the elected bishop from New Hampshire, and for the continued debate on formal ratification of rites for same-sex unions. This is what his language means.

His distinction between a particular case and a public debate is true enough. But the association is clear, and if the General Convention confirms the bishop's election, then the issue of same-sex unions is by implication accepted. The two are definitely related.

But more heinous than his logic is Bishop Griswold's presumption. How can he presume to call this man a "priest in good standing?" On what authority does the Presiding Bishop make this claim? The bishop elect of New Hampshire has, and does, violate the express teaching of Scripture. He is currently in a homosexual relationship, sexually active, for which he has divorced his wife and neglected his children. He has, therefore, violated not one but two principles of Christian moral truth. For the Presiding Bishop to call this man a "priest in good standing" makes a mockery of the teaching of the Bible and of the moral integrity of our church.

Moreover, for Bishop Griswold to proceed from this presumption to speak of fixing our eyes on the larger purposes of the church strains the nerve of the most patient saint. It is as if the church is unfocused because it is immersed in this controversy. Given the character of his argument, it is rather the Presiding Bishop who needs to focus, and to focus on the truth! Then the controversy, much of which is now his own making, would be resolved.

Finally, with respect to the letter of Bishop Griswold. He calls us to the "enduring mission of God in Christ who has reconciled all things to himself through the cross" It is, of course, merci-fully true that the church's mission is to offer the reconciling power of the cross of Jesus Christ. But do we forget that the meaning of reconciliation through the cross is the forgiveness of sin and true moral guilt? Do we forget that it is our sin that put our Lord on that very cross? What can it possibly mean to condone what the Bible condemns and then to invoke the reconciliation of Christ? I tell you what it means. It means something very bad. It means that this kind of thinking is sheer sophistry, making the worse appear the better cause, and presuming categories of judgment that are relative and arbitrary, not the absolute truths of the Word of God. Shame on him. His thoughts and actions do not offer the reconciliation of the cross; they obscure them. By condoning sin, he withholds the possibility of forgiveness.

Well, enough of his letter. We must pray for the Presiding Bishop. "Fret not thyself because of the ungodly," says the Psalmist.

Let us turn to the Sword of the Spirit. There are not many passages of the Scriptures that address homosexual behavior, but the few that do are definitive.

(to be continued)

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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