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The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion in Crisis - Part VII

As the General Convention has stepped out of the light, so has the Episcopal Church herself awakened in the midst of a dark wood. Now we must find our way, again, to the path of pilgrimage. We seek that City whose builder and maker is God.

We have need now to pray, and deliberate, and act. The battle is upon us. But in one way, at least, our struggle is not new. It is, indeed, an old conflict that began in that first, pristine, Garden. The question the Serpent then posed to Eve is set before us once more. "Yea, hath God said?"

The question of whether God has spoken and declared his will is the same now for us in three forms. Has God spoken in the Holy Scriptures? Has he spoken in the moral tradition of the Church Catholic? Has he spoken in the wisdom of the Anglican Communion? The answer to the question in all three forms is an unequivocal yes. God has told the truth about human sexuality, both what it is and what it is not.

In this series, I have reviewed the biblical teaching and some of the arguments for the practice of homosexuality. There are others, and I want to take up a few of them, because the laity are constantly exposed to them. It is important that we face the arguments, because they oppose what God has said, and what the church has received and taught. It will not do simply to revert to pietism, to put faith in a notion of Jesus that leaves him without knowledge or will, without content and void. Jesus is not the mere extension of our pious feelings and opinions. He is the way, the truth, and the life.

Some of our opponents claim that their position is, in fact, compatible with Scripture, and in claiming so they use diverse and clever interpretations. None of them is compelling. Others are less ingenious, but perhaps more honest. Sitting in judgment of the primary authority of our religion, they believe unashamedly that the Scripture is wrong and should be rewritten. Both of these positions represent an ideology that would refashion the revealed will of God by the imaginations of their own hearts. Sadly, there are some clergy who have made inane attempts to discredit the orthodox teaching of the church by what are casual, ignorant, and slow-witted uses of Scripture. I will not give their foolishness the dignified status of an interpretation. I will say that their irresponsible and cavalier use of Scripture undermines the confidence

of the laity in the Word of God written. St. James says they are in big trouble.

I take up this last group first. One such irresponsible use of Scripture refers to the context of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. They want to make the point that if you argue from the Book of Leviticus to oppose homosexual practice then you must also employ the Mosaic judicial punishment, stoning, and not only for that particular sin, but for sins such as murder, adultery, and even disobedient children. Sounds impressive but it is really specious.

These clergy have neglected distinctions that are clearly made in Scripture, and in our tradition, between the ceremonial law, the civil or judicial law, and the moral law. Article VII of the Thirty-nine Articles states, "Although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the Civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral." (1928 BCP, p.604; 1979 BCP, p.869).

These distinctions, seen so clearly by the Church Catholic, are found first within the development of Scripture itself. The ceremonial law of the Old Testament no longer binds Christians because the entire apparatus of sacrifice has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. (See Colossians 2:10-17; Hebrews 10:1-23.) Likewise, the civil or judicial law of the Old Testament is abrogated. Christians have been taken into the Body of Christ, whose Church is universal, spread throughout time and place and history. The Church claims only moral discipline, repentance and forgiveness. It is the State, in its many national forms, that becomes the administrator of God's justice. (See Galatians 3:26-29; 1 Peter 2:13-17; Romans 13:1-7.) The Church, however, continues to teach the moral law as what is holy, righteous, and good. While moral law cannot save, only Christ can do that, moral law provides the framework for how human beings are to live if they would grow up into the holiness of Christ Jesus. (See Matthew 5:17-20; Romans 13:8-14; James 1:17-27.) The Levitical prohibition of homosexual practice is morally binding upon Christians because it reinforces God's creative will for human sexuality. It is in keeping with what is taught in Genesis about marriage, in the words of Jesus, and in the explicit teaching of St. Paul. Those clergy that would blur the distinctions between ceremonial, civil, and moral law understand neither the Scripture nor our tradition.

Let us turn now to a more reasonable argument, the argument for love and inclusion. It seems that more and more of the faithful are endorsing this one opinion. It is simply this: the overriding teaching of our Lord was one of love, love first of all for God and then love for one's neighbor. The church shares this love by the means of grace to all who call upon the name of Christ Jesus. Therefore, the church should accept, embrace, and bless those who feel they must practice homosexuality.

Well, we can agree with their premise, but not with their conclusion. There can be no doubt that the love of God is true. God is love. His love is absolutely true. There is no disagreement about that.

Our disagreement is about how we participate in love, how we live

truly in love. That is the question that divides us. What is the truth about the practice of love?

As Christians, we ask the question of how we participate in love by looking to Jesus. And first of all he tells us that to live in love means to follow him, no matter what the cost.

When it came to the question of marriage, of how God intends for us to practice love in the state of matrimony, Jesus took us back to the words of Genesis. In the beginning, he said, God made them male and female that they might become one flesh. Because of the hardness of their hearts Moses allowed divorce, but God had not intended it to be so. We are to return to God's will in the beginning. That is how, says Jesus, we are to practice love in marriage.

When it came to sexual activity outside of marriage, Jesus said that both the perverse imagination and unlawful intercourse were not the way to practice love. "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications (the Greek word *porneiae* means every form of unlawful intercourse), murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and defile the man" (Mark 7:21).

Jesus himself put these all together – evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications (*porneiae*), and so on. He told us that these are all false ways to live out of the heart. They are out of love's order. They defile man, made to live by, with, and in true love. Therefore, they are sinful.

The Lord Jesus was the only human being ever to practice love perfectly. He is clear in his teaching about the realm of human sexuality. Our church shall find her way out of the dark wood only by following Jesus' teaching about the practice of love. We must never, ever, confuse the sweet elements of human love and friendship, which all human beings share, with the passions of our fallen sexuality. St. Augustine was right about the fall of the soul into concupiscence. He was equally right about the conversion of the soul into holiness.

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