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The Authority of the Bible

One should not frequent clergy conferences too often. While seeing the brethren is fun and of some comfort, one hears things said that you wish had not been said by anyone, much less those who adorn themselves with clerical collars.

At our recent retreat there were two remarks that clearly revealed the present state of the Episcopal Church. Both of these had to do with the Bible.

I have no doubt that the clergy who offered these tidbits of wisdom made what they thought were valid points. I am equally confident that these are dear men, faithful and diligent in their duties, who spoke with good intentions. Well, I am sorry to say, such is the deception of the heart. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" says Jeremiah.

The first remark was both shallow and profound. An elderly priest declared that with the recent decision of the General Convention, the church was now in a position to take a new approach in the interpretation of Scripture. We are now able to invoke the new hermeneutical category of love. Love! It seems that the Church Catholic has known nothing of love – until now. Oh, my goodness gracious!

I do not think this well-meaning priest intended such an egregious error. To remind him of how important the view of love has been, we might point simply to St. Augustine's teaching on the Two Cities. Augustine taught that the whole of human history is constituted in two cities, whose wills are devoted to two contrary loves. One is of God, and the other of the world. Love moves all of human existence, but love errs when it embraces this world just as and only as it wills, instead of through the truth of the love of God. And so when we turn to the Scripture, we find that for St. Augustine, and for the Church Catholic, the Scripture is concerned with nothing more than with the reform and renewal of love.

But regardless of this priest's glaring mistake, his point was profound. The church of the General Convention has indeed taken a new approach in the interpretation of Scripture. By its action, the General Convention has established an open principle for interpreting and evaluating Scripture. This open principle has no specific content. It invokes not one, but many different arguments, none of them alone

compelling, and a number of them contradictory to one another.

Notice some of these opposites. (None of them represents the orthodox view.) There was the argument for immediate political inclusion. "Gay people as a class of people have been excluded from ordination and consecration in the church like women once were. Therefore, as women have been ordained so should they be, without delay." And there was an opposite argument. "The acceptance of practicing homosexuals should be placed under a period of discernment and probation to see if this is of God or not." There was the argument for the Scriptural teaching of mercy over judgment. "In this case the church should exercise mercy. This sin is just not that important." And then there was the contrary argument. "We should dispense with Scripture as a definitive standard altogether because of its fallibility on moral questions. The Bible is simply wrong." There was also the argument for accepting homosexual practice based on personal experience. "I have found that such people who prefer this sexual orientation are really just like you and me." And there was the opposite argument based not on experience but on scientific theory. "These people are born this way, genetically determined, or with the brains of the other sex. They are not like you and me, and therefore their lifestyle ought to be approved."

While these different arguments were often contradictory, they appeared finally as one. What drew these incompatible and contradictory views together was not any compelling theological rationale based on Scripture, but rather the sheer force of a majority vote. Consequently, by an open principle, implemented by majority vote, the General Convention declared that its will stands in judgment not only of the Bible's plain meaning but also of the unanimous interpretation of the Bible in the historic Church Catholic. Thus the General Convention has repudiated the Bible as the primary authority for faith and practice. What such an open principle means is this: you can fill it with anything and everything you need to justify your point of view. Sophistry lives and breathes.

Another elderly priest took this open principle to its logical conclusion. He was very happy to exclaim that with the actions of the General Convention, the Episcopal Church had been delivered from the "shackles of the Bible!" He went on to say something else that sent a chill up my spine. In his view, the pulpit balances the Bible. This was evident, he opined, in the liturgical setting of the pulpit situated across from the lectern. Oh, my goodness, goodness gracious!

This priest's statement, shocking as it was, (and as it was meant to be), was really ridiculous and pretentious. The thought of Fr. Dunbar, or me, or of anyone standing in the pulpit of St. John's Church and presuming to balance the Holy Scripture with his own finite peering into shadows is enough to confound even the most loyal churchman!

These priests were well intentioned, but they are examples of what has happened to the mind of the Episcopal Church. They no longer represent the mind of the Church Catholic, especially as it has to do with the Holy Scripture.

From the beginning the Church has recognized that the Scripture is really its own authority. The Apostolic writings depended upon the teaching of Christ. And Christ depended on the teaching of the Old

Testament. It is, in fact, impossible to separate Jesus from how he viewed the Old Testament. The ancient Scriptures governed not just his ministry, but his thinking also, and even his self-identity. And thus the Old Testament looked forward to Christ. The New Testament looked back to him. And he stood as the center and coherence of the whole.

We need only recount several incidents in Jesus' life to see how this is so. At the beginning of his ministry, when he was tempted of the devil in the wilderness, Jesus rebuked Satan, and all temptation, with a quote from Deuteronomy (8:3); "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." The Scriptures were his authority.

When in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus qualified the common understanding of the Law, "But I say unto you," he did not contradict the Law, but deepened its spiritual meaning, while leaving "jot and tittle" intact. The moral law of the Old Testament was binding for Jesus (Matthew 4:4-11).

When, in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus stood up to read, he chose a passage from the Book of Isaiah, and after reading it aloud, declared, "This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:16-21). The Messianic hope of Isaiah determined the self-identity of Jesus.

And after the resurrection, when Jesus appeared to the disciples in Jerusalem, he opened their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures, "That all things must be fulfilled which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me" (Luke 24:33-44). The ancient Scriptures prophesied the ministry of Jesus.

We could go on to see how Jesus submitted himself to the Holy Scriptures, but to do so we would have to reproduce the entire New Testament. For that is what the New Testament essentially is - the fulfillment of the Word of God in Christ. One cannot read the New Testament, even casually, and miss this central fact. That is why the Church, from the very beginning, has considered the Old Testament to be the possession of Christians, and the New Testament, the progeny of the Old.

The Christian Church has received the authority of the Bible in its integrity. She uses reason to think about that authority, and to conform her life to it, just as the Lord Jesus did. The General Convention has preferred another principle, open and void.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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