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## First Principles

The present landscape of the Episcopal Church is like the depths of Plato's cave. Many believe the shadows of common opinion as if these were the true nature of reality, but they are far, far from it.

Recently, some of these opinions were expressed in our local diocesan newspaper, "The Episcopal Church in Georgia." These opinions need to be rethought, or in keeping with Plato's analogy, they need to be seen not in shadow but in the light of the sun. I have three such opinions in mind: 1) that the political process of the Episcopal Church is the final authority; 2) that those who hold to historic faith and morals are fundamentalists; 3) and that a vague notion of family is enough to reconcile our divisions. I want to address these various opinions in a series of questions.

1) Is the political process of the Episcopal Church the final authority for Episcopalians? No. Essential truths of the Church Universal cannot be changed through a majority vote of ECUSA's General Convention. Essential truths having to do with the doctrines of human sexuality, marriage, and ordination can only be received through the true authority of the Church, and that true authority lies in the Bible and the teaching of the Church Catholic. Our national church, which is a part of a larger Communion of Churches and professes to be part of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, simply does not have authority to act unilaterally on essential matters of faith and practice. The notion of "Let votes rule!" simply does not apply to such matters. That is why many people have declared, correctly, that the actions of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church and the Dioceses of New Westminster, B.C., and New Hampshire are null and void.

But in order to think more carefully about the opinion "Let votes rule!" we need to return to first principles.

And first of all is this. The institution of the Church does not exist to make up the Gospel but rather to receive it and to pass it on. Spiritual reality comes before institutional form. As the greatest Anglican Theologian, Richard Hooker, wrote, "The spiritual power of the Church being such as neither can be challenged by right of nature, nor could by human authority be instituted, because the forces and effects thereof are super-natural and divine; we are to make no doubt or question, but that from him which is the Head it hath descended unto us that are the body invested therewith" (Laws VI.ii.2).

In other words, the truth of God, embodied in Jesus Christ, is received into the church as His Body, and the Church, therefore, is not subject finally to any perceived natural rights or machinations of human institutions. The Episcopal Church is given authority, as the historic Preface of the Prayer Book puts it, over rites and ceremonies, but not in any way over an "essential point of doctrine." Thus rites and ceremonies can be received with a "meek, candid, and charitable frame of mind," knowing that these support the essential doctrines of Christianity.

We can all be sorry indeed that ECUSA is faced with the errors of the General Convention and New Hampshire, but we can hardly claim authority for those errors on the basis of a majority vote. Indeed the opposite is the case. ECUSA's political process became wholly illegitimate once it forsook the authority of the Bible as understood by the historic and universal Church.

2). Are those who hold to the historic faith and practice of the Church fundamentalists? No. One of the tactics of those who disregard the authority of Scripture is to label those who take Scripture seriously as fundamentalists. By fundamentalists they mean those who interpret Scripture by a kind of unthinking literalism.

Of course, to level a charge of unthinking literalism toward Catholic Christianity is totally absurd. The historic Church has interpreted the Bible, always and carefully, through understanding the different forms of literature that make up the text of the Bible. This is, in fact, a first principle of Christianity.

Early in the life of the church different modes of interpretation included the literal but were not confined to it. Some passages were to be understood literally and in other ways as well, typologically, or anagogically, or allegorically. Sometimes the literal did not apply at all.

Later, especially at the Reformation, when some interpreters considered these various modes excessive, still they did not violate the different kinds of literature that are found in the Bible. They paid close attention to the different ways in which historical, or poetic, or simple narrative forms of writing appear.

Still later, with the rise of historical critical theory, and the methods of literary criticism, the Church again sought to be accurate when treating the nature of a particular text, its context, and development.

Even when one considers the different ways of treating the biblical text over the centuries, the fact remains that the Church Catholic has never confined herself to an unthinking literalism. And most important of all is the point that through each form of biblical interpretation the essential doctrines have remained the same.

And so when the Roman Catholic Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, other Orthodox churches, and various national churches of the Anglican Communion claim the authority of Scripture in relation to the moral issues that face us, they do not resort to an unthinking literalism, but to careful and accurate interpretation. Are those in the Episcopal Church who stand for historic faith and moral life fundamentalists? Nonsense. We stand with the Church Catholic under the authority of Scripture.

3). Can we resolve the differences in the Episcopal Church by claiming that we are all in the family? No. And no for two reasons. The first reason has to do with the character of family in the New Testament. The second has to do with the hypocritical way that the notion of family is used in the current crisis.

When it comes to the idea of the family in the New Testament, Jesus is quite clear. The Christian family is not defined by institutional association, but rather by obedience to the will of God. We see this in the Gospel story.

Once, when the family of Jesus wanted him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd, they sent word by a disciple. "Behold thy mother and thy brethren stand without desiring to speak to thee. But he answered and said unto him that told him, 'Who is my mother? And who are my brethren?' And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, 'Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother' " (Matthew 12:46-50).

We are the family of our Father in heaven not by mere institutional association but by participation in the will of God. The fact that we are born again in Baptism and that we grow in grace through the Holy Communion means that our place in the family begins and continues through our incorporation into Jesus Christ. This sacramental identity is that of the universal Christian Church, not merely the institution of ECUSA. To call one another family on any other basis is to miss the true meaning of Christian identity.

This brings us to the second reason why using the notion of family to mean ECUSA exclusively will not do. If it be true that our place in the family of God as his adopted children is through our incorporation into Christ Jesus, then our family extends throughout the Anglican Communion and the Church Catholic everywhere. For ECUSA to turn her back on the rest of the family by a unilateral action of the General Convention and the Diocese of New Hampshire was nothing less than scandalous, heretical and schismatic. Now for members of ECUSA to seek to hold ECUSA together by claiming that we are family is sheer hypocrisy, not to mention muddled thinking.

And so this also is a first principle. We are the adopted children of God by the grace given us in Jesus, and we share this identity with Christians at all times and in all places.

It is time for us to return to first principles with evangelical zeal and catholic understanding. Otherwise, we shall stay, as we are, chained to our passions, and able to see only the shadows flickering on the wall of the cave.

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