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An Open Letter to the Bishop of Georgia (III)

Dear Bishop Louttit,

Again, following your guiding principle, I offer my opinion about the issues you raised in your speech to the 182nd Convention of the Diocese of Georgia. In this part of my letter I want to take up what you called the "central concern" of your address, namely, "how the Episcopal Church uses the Bible." I agree that how we view the Bible, and use it, is at the heart of the matter.

There were several ways that you approached this topic. You asked the question, "How do we understand the Bible?" You spoke of the Bible as "the community's book." You asked the question, "What in the Bible is authoritative?" You offered the opinion that the Nicene Creed is "our guide to reading the Bible." And you stated that in order "to understand the Bible, we must know the whole story, reading the texts in context." You also took the opportunity to speak about two biblical texts, which have to do with the practice of homosexuality.

Bishop, I understand that you were not trying to present a systematic account of Holy Scripture, and so I will attempt to give you my opinion of what you said in its context. Where I have misunderstood you, I ask for your patience. Where we disagree will I think become evident.

How do we understand the Bible? Your point begins by repeating the ordination vow for the clergy which says " I solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God and to contain all things necessary to salvation and I do solemnly engage to conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church." From this you move on to ask how we understand the Bible to be authoritative. Your answer is that we do not have a doctrine of inerrancy as do the Baptists, nor do we have a final authority like the Pope. Rather, you choose Martin Luther as your paradigm. You agree with him that "the ultimate revelation of God's Word was the living and incarnate Christ." And you go on to say, "Anglicans believe that it is through the Bible's words that we are prepared to recognize the risen Lord in our life today as he leads us into His new creation!" Having said this, you seem to contradict yourself when you assert, "Episcopalians have never claimed an infallible source to give us certainty that we know the absolute truth for all times." I assume you do not mean that the "living and incarnate Christ" is less than the absolute truth. The Christian Church has always proclaimed that he is.

I suppose you mean that neither the Scriptures nor the Church is an infallible source of knowledge in all things for all times. I agree. The Scripture must be infallible only in what, as a whole, it intends to teach, and it does not intend to teach all forms of knowledge. Churches and councils have erred. But what you seem to imply here is that as far as morality is concerned, specifically the practice of homo-sexuality, we have no sure guide.

On this point I believe you are wrong. The Bible does in fact teach, infallibly, that the practice of homosexuality is sinful. The Church Catholic has always believed so. I will come to that below. First, let us continue with what you believe to be authoritative about the Bible.

You ask the question, "What in the Bible is authoritative?" And you proceed, "It's authoritative about God's love and actions for us – the story of creation, redemption, and sanctification. Remember the required doctrinal statement of all those who are ordained in our part of the Catholic Church: 'I believe the Holy Scriptures to be the Word of God containing all things necessary to salvation.' Note the second half of that: 'containing all things necessary to salvation.' That is what the Bible is about and what it is authoritative about."

You seem to believe that, with respect to "God's love and actions for us – the story of creation, redemption, and sanctification," the Bible is, after all, an infallible source of knowledge for all time. Otherwise, the Bible would not be authoritative. And yet it is remarkable to me that having made such a statement, your address, which was written in the context of the Church's present crisis, contained nothing at all about the creation story and its authority for the doctrine of marriage. If creation is one of those things about which the Bible is authoritative, why would not the goodness of marriage, as the created order of God, find any place in your address? Does not the Lord Jesus invoke the creation narrative of Genesis as the explicit authority for marriage (Matthew 19:3ff)?

Moreover, your address appears to neglect the central place of the fall of man. Is the Bible not authoritative about this as well? After all, from what does mankind need to be redeemed? The declaration of the Psalmist holds true. "Behold, I was shapen in wickedness and in sin hath my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5)? I would have hoped that your address could have more adequately recalled the whole story of the Bible.

Still, given these omissions, you place the Bible's authority in "all things necessary to salvation." And I am glad that you did.

Salvation is, in fact, at the heart of our crisis. The Bible is clear that salvation has to do with the forgiveness of sin and victory over death. This truth is embodied in the "comfortable words" which, after confession and absolution, we remember at every celebration of Holy Communion. "Come unto me all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you" (Matthew 11:28). "So God loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). "This is a true saying and worthy of all men to be received that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (I Timothy 1:15). And, "If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the

righteous; and he is the Propitiation for our sins" (I John 2:1,2).

The fact that the practice of homosexuality is a sin raises the crucial issue of salvation. This is the very reason why the General Convention and the Diocese of New Hampshire have committed such a grievous, harmful, and serious offense. The Bible condemns all sin, including the practice of homosexuality, as that which separates us from God, and in its unrepentant form, leads us to death and eternal alienation.

Now we come to one of the definitive biblical texts, which teaches, infallibly, that the practice of homosexuality is sinful. Says St. Paul, "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the Kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate nor abusers of themselves with mankind [these words refer to homosexual acts] nor thieves, not covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the Kingdom of God" (I Corinthians 6:9).

Bishop, I know this is unpleasant to hear, and yet surely we must hear it. Paul does not intend to give us a comprehensive list of sins. His point is that all sin, unless repented of and forgiven by the Lord Jesus, excludes us from God's eternal presence. This does not mean that our repentance must be perfect, as if our salvation depended upon our ability, but our intention to repent must be true and sincerely made from the heart.

"All things necessary to salvation" are at the heart of our crisis. The Bible addresses them all authoritatively: the creation of man, the fall of man, the problem of sin, and redemption in Christ. And therefore when anyone advocates the blessing and consecration of sin, he advocates undermining not only the authority of the Bible, but also the very salvation for which our Lord lived and died.

Bishop, if the Bible is indeed authoritative in this way, instead of trying to minimize sin, why did you not exalt the full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction of the Lord Jesus for the sins of the whole world? And, then, call us all to repentance - faith, hope, charity - and thanksgiving?

(to be continued)

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