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The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.35 No.15

The Second Sunday in Lent

03/07/04

An Open Letter to the Bishop of Georgia (IV)

Dear Bishop Louttit,

I have appreciated your invitation to share my opinion with you on the points you raised in your address to the Diocesan Convention. I have these final thoughts, although I could continue inasmuch as your address touched on matters so fundamental to Christianity.

I want to continue with your view "how the Episcopal Church uses the Bible" and then say something about your notion that the Church has an inherent conflict between those who contend for holiness and those who seek unity.

Speaking of the Bible you asserted, "Episcopalians have always understood the Bible as the community's book, thus, the public readings. Community agreement on understanding is expected – one individual conscience reading by itself is questionable." This point seems to me to cut in ways one might not expect.

First, it seems that you are placing the authority of Scripture beneath the authority of the "community," by which I take you to mean the Episcopal Church in the present form of the General Convention. If so, this would be to turn the historical position of our Church on the absolute supremacy of Scripture upside down.

It is without question that the Holy Scriptures have been the first principle and formative authority for the doctrines and sacraments of the Church. In this she has followed the pattern of our Lord himself.

Jesus submitted to the authority of the Old Testament Scripture. It was the Scripture that foretold his messianic mission which he proclaimed on that glorious day in Nazareth when he stood up to read from the book of Isaiah. (Luke 4:16-30). It was the Scripture that embodied the divine law, which he himself would fulfill. In his great Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught clearly that not one jot or tittle of the law would pass away before heaven and earth pass away and all is fulfilled (Matthew 5:17-19). That Jesus was the goal and perfection of the Scripture was shown again, when, after the resurrection, Jesus met two disillusioned disciples on the road to Emmaus. He taught, then, how his life, death, and resurrection had fulfilled these same Scriptures (Luke 24:13-32). It cannot be denied that Jesus accepted the divine gift of Scripture and brought its prophecy and authority to completion. This was the good news of the Church and also the pattern

of her knowledge and will, her doctrines and sacraments.

The Bible is the book of the Church only in the sense that it informs the essence of her religious life; it is as Cranmer taught, "the instrument of salvation." And so the Church has submitted, comfortably, to its authority from the beginning. No canons or majority decisions or disciplines of any church stand even remotely close to the authority of God's Word written. (This of course has been the teaching of the Anglican Church from her inception. You will recall the pertinent articles in the Articles of Religion, VI, XX, and XXXIV.)

However, the Bible is not the community's book in the sense that the General Convention or the Diocese of New Hampshire can manipulate its message, like the ancient god Proteus, taking whatever shape opportunity affords. This is the reason so many provinces of the Anglican Communion and the other great churches of Catholic Christianity have repudiated what ECUSA has done.

Second, as for "one individual conscience reading by itself being questionable." In principle, I agree wholeheartedly. But I would therefore argue that this is why Bishops of the Episcopal Church cannot abandon the Catholic understanding for their own conviction or inclination. Furthermore, I do not accept that given this principle, each Episcopalian is obliged to agree with the protean interpretations of the General Convention.

Lastly, with respect to the Bible, you say rightly that the Nicene Creed is "our guide to reading the

Bible." I cannot disagree with that, except to say that surely the Creed is not exhaustive. What does the Creed say about the Blessed Sacrament? Or Holy Matrimony?

But when you go on to say "the only mention of sin in the Creed is about the forgiveness of sins," you imply that the revisionist doctrine of the General Convention and the Diocese of New Hampshire, which would bless homosexual practice, is valid, and should be permitted and considered part of the doctrine and discipline of the Episcopal Church. Because the Nicene Creed mentions only the forgiveness of sins, then our guide for interpreting the Bible is to understand that the Bible cares nothing for self-examination, or contrition, or repentance, or the destructiveness of sinful behavior.

But such a way of reading the Creed would actually revise the Creed's intention. Such an interpretation would neglect the truth that alongside our profession of the Lord's atoning work, on the basis of which we believe in the forgiveness of sins, is also the reality that our Lord will come with glory to judge the quick and the dead. Sins are not only forgiven. Those sins, which are not repented of, are judged. This too is central to the Creed.

And speaking of the Creed brings me to my last point. You seem to believe that the Church has always experienced two opposing sides, those who value holiness, and those who value unity. I would suggest that such an opposition, while it may make for interesting speculation, is really simplistic, an incorrect historical analysis, and ultimately bogus. Holiness is not opposed to unity. In truth unity presupposes holiness, and holiness achieves unity. Let me explain.

Holiness is the very nature of God (See I Peter 1:15,16). Holiness, therefore, is not of human design; it is the divine character. And God's intention is that we should live in and through his holiness.

And thus, surely it is a mistake to oppose participation in the holiness of God to the unity of the Church. Indeed, it simply cannot be done. The truth is that the only way to unity is through charity, and the only way to charity is through holiness. One might not commonly think of holiness as having to do with charity, but their relation is essential.

Charity, love, is "the very bond of peace and of all virtues." Thus, charity is the activity of union. (See John 17:25, 26). The union of the Father and the Son is that of love, and there is no divine unity without love. Love, with holiness, is the character of God.

But for us whose loves are multiple and scattered in the world, charity does not come easy. In order for one to love God, one must love him above all else. And when one does love God above all else, then all other forms of love fall rightly into place. The love of neighbor is freely given and the love of self is properly ordered. Without the love of God first, all love flows out into the chaos of desire. But by the conversion of our loves into the love of God, which is to say, by the cultivation of the life of holiness, then the unity of love with God, and in the Church, and in one's own life, is actual.

In this way one can see that holiness is love rightly ordered. And thus unity, the activity of love in its integrity, requires holiness.

And so you see Bishop, it will not do to oppose holiness and unity. These are complementary attributes of one divine life in which by the grace of God we share. To oppose them is to rend the life of the soul in two. It is certainly to miss the call of the Holy Spirit.

I suppose this is as good a point as any to end my letter to you. There is much that I have left unanswered, left perhaps for another occasion. What I must conclude is that at virtually every turn it seems that you are trying to advocate a view of the Church and the Christian life that is unfamiliar to the tradition of the Episcopal Church in particular, and to the Catholic Church in general. The truth is that the aberrations of the General Convention and the Diocese of New Hampshire have no justification. No devaluation of the authority of Scripture, no diminution of sin, no exaltation of political process can change that fact.

As for us, we will continue as we have been, faithful to the principles of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, which are those of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The new religion of Proteus we will not follow.

Yours only in Christ,

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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