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The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.35 No.31

The Third Sunday after Trinity

06/27/04

Church and State

If we thought that in our secular culture relations between the church and the state were clear cut, we better think again. What the secular authorities have done in several places is now having a direct impact on the practice of moral life in the Church. It now seems that the utter separation of church and state is a bogus notion. The question becomes what moral (religious) principles shall govern our souls.

Three state governments have handled same-sex unions in a way that affects the local Episcopal churches. In Vermont, Bishop Thomas Ely has declared that given the fact, three years ago now, Vermont passed a system of civil unions which parallel marriage in state benefits, it is time for that Episcopal Diocese to function sacramentally after Vermont's example. His diocese has developed what he calls a policy, theology, and liturgy for same-sex unions and is in the process of presenting these to the clergy and laity.

In Massachusetts, where the Supreme Court has mandated same-sex marriages, the Episcopal Bishop has been reluctant to approve same-sex unions in the church, even though he favors them, because there is as yet no officially sanctioned canon or liturgy. The Rev. Carter Heyward, one of the first eleven women illegally ordained in the Episcopal Church, has said that she will officiate in the near future at two same-sex weddings. Following the lead of the State of Massachusetts, she sees her action in the church, and toward her bishop, as a matter of "constructive disobedience."

And in the Diocese of California, where the Mayor of San Francisco has instituted same sex marriages in civil disobedience to state law, the Assistant Bishop, Otis Charles, was "married" to his male partner in a public liturgy in a local church. Bishop Swing, whom he assists, became angry and has since removed the assistant bishop, not because he is opposed to same-sex marriages - he like the Bishop of Massachusetts is in favor of them - but because Bishop Swing had intended that all such ceremonies be conducted without the attention of the media, and the assistant bishop offered his ceremony as a media extravaganza!

These three events reflect an actual influence of civil government on the church. In the case of Vermont, it is the result of the legislative process. In Massachusetts it was the result of a judgment of the State Supreme Court imposed upon the legislature. In California it has occurred as a kind of anarchy. In two cases, the Episcopal Church is

following the moral direction of the state, and in one case the political revolution of the Mayor. All three are no doubt bolstered by the action of General Convention and the Diocese of New Hampshire this past year.

While the influence of the state on the church is in each of these cases non-legal, the moral and political influence remains the same. The churchmen who follow this political lead believe in the moral integrity

of same-sex unions, and of their equal stature to that of marriage as far as human rights are concerned.

And so in a strange and ironic way, these developments show that there is an inherent relation between the state and the church. Each institution must claim a higher moral authority in order to justify its view of human rights. Only one such moral authority exists and that is in religion itself.

What modern liberal secularism has tried to forget cannot in the end be forgotten. Western democratic ideas, which have developed alongside the doctrines of human rights, are in the main products of Judeo-Christian religion. To say that all men are created with certain unalienable rights can only mean that one's ultimate worth is grounded in a rationally conceived view of human life whose origin lies outside and above mere nature. And thus the true author of human life, and human moral practice, conceived in both church and state, is God.

For many this point will be missed. Some advocates for equal rights simply assert that they are due such rights because they are indeed human. It is to say, "I deserve this because I am me." They never go beyond that assertion to ask how they became human, or what being human might mean. They certainly do not go so far as to ask what enables them to form language to articulate the assertion that they possess rights. Neither questions of being nor questions of knowledge enter the picture. And these questions were of the utmost importance to those who formed Christendom and nation states.

Some advocates believe that same-sex marriages are the proper development of the Christian ethic. I think they are gravely mistaken on two points of Theology, that of Creation and the doctrine of marriage itself, and that of Redemption and the ethical good which Christ Jesus requires of his Church.

It is just here in the area of religion that the argument must begin. One cannot look into the life of the Church and her historic doctrines, without seeing the greatest care given to thinking the axioms of the faith as they were revealed through the prophets, apostles, saints and martyrs, and which councils, theologians, teachers, and ministers of the Gospel have continuously contemplated. Nor can one look with any true sense of history into the formation of democratic governments and human rights, unless he is willing to think again the great ideas that established governments, and that came principally from no other source than that of religious truth and conviction. The historical and theoretical facts are that both our country and our religion were formed in the womb of religion. The state and the church are our organic connection to our forefathers.

And so, we simply cannot stand on the branches and cut out the roots.

The whole structure, having no substantial support from the bottom, will fall from the top. If we would survive the present arbitrary morality which now descends upon the church and the state, like Scylla and Charybdis, we should rediscover the only principles that can justify human life and love, and they are the precious absolutes of our religion. Some may want to borrow from them, accepting what is convenient to their will and dispense with the others, but in the final analysis, it cannot be done. What we have received is like a seamless garment covering the unity of soul and body.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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