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GENERAL CONVENTION 2006

As I write this essay, the bitter farce that is the General Convention of the Episcopal Church is still slouching towards its end. Next week I hope to provide a fuller report and comment on the Convention and its likely consequences. Barring some surprising change of heart at the last minute, however, its outcome already seems likely to prove profoundly alienating to all those who believe the historic Christian faith, and who care about the future of the Episcopal Church in the Anglican Communion. Grandiose in its self-adulation, childish in its willfulness, mindless in its conformity to western liberal elite opinion, and irresponsibly indifferent to its most basic commitments as an organ of ecclesiastical government, the General Convention Church regresses ever further into spiritual irrelevance and drags down the Episcopal Church into division and shame.

What has been accomplished so far is the election of Katharine Jefferts Schori, the bishop of Nevada, as presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church. Following in the steps of Frank Griswold, she reduces the gospel to a one-dimensional doctrine of inclusion; and she supports the very doctrines and practices which have provoked the present crisis (same-sex ordination and blessing of same-sex unions). Furthermore, her ordination as bishop is not recognized or accepted by a large portion of the Communion, so her relations with most of the other Primates will be based on a courteous fiction. To a dispassionate observer these facts might well be reckoned serious impediments. To the General Convention Church, which regards its autonomy as absolute, and which asserts its right to pursue its own revolutionary agenda regardless of its effect on the "bonds of affection" that unite the Communion, these impediments are probably seen as positive qualifications. As presiding bishop, she is indeed well qualified to embody the defiant unilateralism of the Episcopal Church.

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It is small consolation that General Convention Episcopalians is not alone in its follies. Tuesday's newspaper contained an Associated Press report of the decision by the National Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), to "receive" (a step short of full approval) a policy paper on "gender-inclusive" language for the Trinity. (Other mainstream churches, including the Episcopal Church, have been moving towards similar "gender-inclusive" language for God for over a decade.) By receiving the paper, the Assembly has permitted (but not mandated) "experimental" use of alternative names for the Trinity that

include (I kid you not): "Mother, Child, Womb"; "Rock, Redeemer, Friend"; and "Lover, Beloved, Love"; as well as the more conventional "Creator, Savior, Sanctifier" and "King of Glory, Prince of Peace, Spirit of Love". According to the policy paper, such formulae are not meant to replace the classical language of "Father, Son, Holy Spirit", but only to provide "fresh ways to speak of the mystery of the triune God" and "expand the church's vocabulary of praise and wonder". This is the standard disclaimer (also used in Episcopal circles), although the actual (and doubtless intended) effect of such "expanded" language for God is to make "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" just one among several options, and no longer definitive. By a kind of doublespeak, the church's language of doctrine and worship is said to be "expanded" by marginalizing and relativizing the revealed name of God.

The policy paper argues that the classical language of Father and Son, given in the New Testament and received by the ancient councils and creeds, "has been used to support the idea that God is male and that men are superior to women" - though it is a matter of historical fact that Presbyterians, like other Christian churches, have always emphatically denied that God was male. (As our own first Article of Religion puts it, God is "without body, parts, or passions": he is not a sexual being.) But as the current debates in the Episcopal Church over the reconstruction of marriage and the ordained ministry demonstrate, an egalitarian social agenda trumps all other cards, even the doctrine of Scripture and tradition, as well as the unity of the Church. This assumption is common currency in the progressive establishments of all the mainstream churches.

In the case of language of the Trinity, what is remarkable about this assumption is that there is not a great deal of evidence that changing the language of God in this way will actually help women and children in need, and in fact there is reason to think it harms them. Our society has discovered by bitter experience, extensively certified by contemporary sociology, that it is women and children in fatherless families who suffer most from poverty, neglect, exploitation, abuse, and violence. Children of fatherless families are also most likely to exhibit a high rate of failure in education, work, personal relationships, and crime. Moreover, it is admitted (reluctantly) that egalitarian individualism in matters sexual and marital has contributed in large part to the epidemic of fatherless families. This is, of course, the same ethos which is regarded as a moral absolute by the elites of mainstream churches, even when the crying practical necessity of a genuinely progressive social agenda - one that would actually benefit women and children in need (as opposed to providing career opportunities for the middle class) - is to recall men to their proper vocation as responsible, committed, loving husbands and fathers. The abuse of male power in the family is corrected not by abolishing husbands and fathers, but by teaching men how to be husbands and fathers.

Historically, the model for men in Christian societies has been the almighty love of God the Father revealed in the gift of his Son, and in his Son's sacrificial love for the Church (although the sacrifice of the cross is now commonly portrayed by feminist theologians as a kind of divine child abuse). This connection of the classical Trinitarian conception of God with family life is made explicit in the Epistle to the Ephesians (5.25-30): "Husbands" exhorts Saint Paul, "love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he

might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies". This is love as sacrificial zeal for the integrity and well-being of the beloved, to the point that the husband identifies his good with that of his wife. "He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the Church: for we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones." Saint Paul's teaching may not be egalitarian – it usually grates on persons of liberal sensibility – but it provides an extraordinarily clear divine mandate for committed, responsible husbands and fathers. A genuinely progressive agenda would be trying to rethink contemporary egalitarianism in the light of this doctrine; but don't hold your breath. The progressive elites now firmly in charge of the mainstream churches are the most reactionary elements in them.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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