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SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

The defining moment in the recent history of the Diocese of Georgia came in August 2003. In the uproar following upon the General Convention earlier that summer, the diocese sponsored public fora, one of which took place at St. Peter's Church on Skidaway Island. In the sermon preached in the presence of Bishop Louttit, the Rev'd George Maxwell put before us the striking aphorism: "being in relationship is more important than being right". The message seemed to be: doctrine divides; community unites. Questions of truth must therefore come second to the demands of unity.

Though widely received as a practical strategy to preserve unity in the midst of controversy, this approach has nonetheless not been highly successful. Two good-sized congregations have already left the diocese; and in the residue, high levels of frustration and alienation persist, and not just among conservatives. The institutional unity sought through the denigration of doctrine has proved elusive. It has not done much to keep us all happily "in relationship" with one another.

One must look for the reason of this failure in the opposition this approach assumes, between "being right" and "being in relationship" – between doctrine and community, truth and love. When these were set up as rival, mutually exclusive principles, it was only logical that those who cherish doctrine were identified as a threat (even a "demonic" one) to institutional unity, and were accused of seeking to divide the diocese, and of imposing their own narrow opinions upon it. Expressed concerns about doctrine were ignored or dismissed, as an irrational quibbling about inessentials. Unsurprisingly, the effect of such suspicion was to deepen the alienation of those who cherish doctrine; and eventually some of them concluded (logically enough) that a church which identifies a concern for doctrine as its enemy is no place for them to stay. Here's an irony to savour: when the defenders of unity identified truth as the enemy of unity, they gave those who cherish truth a reason to abandon unity.

The logic of this assumption worked out the other way too, with a mirror-image symmetry. Just as the defenders of unity regarded those expressing doctrinal concerns as divisive and disloyal, so the defenders of doctrine regarded those who prized unity with equivalent suspicion, as being willing to abandon the doctrinal essentials of the faith. Unsurprisingly, those who cherish unity felt hurt by what they regarded as a groundless aspersion upon their faith – which of course fed their

willingness to accuse those who cherish doctrine of narrow-minded fundamentalism.

And so it has gone, in a vicious cycle of growing alienation. The defenders of unity feel betrayed by those who chose truth over unity; the defenders of truth feel are frustrated by those who set the claims of unity above truth. It seems that the only way out of the impasse is (on one side) to leave the diocese; and (on the other) to invoke the sword of the civil power to resolve the church's disputes; although the terms in which the Scripture speaks of this makes this a counsel of despair. "Brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers"; "I speak to your shame" (1 Corinthians 6:1-8).

Doctrine, we are told, is divisive: yet non-doctrinal unity itself also proves divisive. This is what the Socratic philosophy would call an *aporia*, a serious perplexity, a contradiction: and it is perfectly possible that we shall have to endure the pain of this *aporia* for quite some time. But it is also possible that it would lead us to re-examine the assumption, that the claims of truth and love, of doctrine and community, are mutually exclusive.

If we look at this question in the Scripture, we find a certain paradox. On the one hand, Jesus was uncompromising in his testimony to the truth, even at the expense of unity. In ironic confirmation of contemporary fears, Jesus declared, "I bring not peace but a sword"; and the sword of division came to sharp point in his claim to teach the truth with the authority of the Son of God – a claim he did not surrender for the sake of a false unity with Caiaphas. On the other hand, his uncompromising testimony to the truth became the foundation for a profound unity. The claims of Truth and Love come together in the apostolic teaching about the Church. "I...beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye be called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Ephesians 4:1-6).

In the teaching of the New Testament, Truth has a certain logical priority over Love: yet Love does not have less authority than Truth. Truth and Love are not opposed or rival principles: for the Spirit of Love proceeding from the Father is also the Spirit of the Son, who is the Word of Truth: three co-equal, co-eternal, consubstantial persons in one God. The demands of Truth and Love may not be set against each other, therefore, without dishonouring both. The apostolic imperative of "speaking the truth in love" (4:15), is laid upon the Church, not least in its controversies.

What might "speaking the truth in love" look like within a diocese? How can we build a unity that is consistent with testimony to the truth? It is an important question. At least some of the defenders of unity might indignantly reply that a doctrinal unity already exists. But their haste to dismiss all doubts on that point undermines their credibility. A deeper engagement is called for than has been offered so far, one that will require much. Yet they also have much to gain. If the defenders of unity acknowledged (rather than dismissing) concerns for doctrine as legitimate, this would then allow the defenders of truth the

security to re-engage with the defenders of unity in seeking a common solution to their respective concerns. And with that acknowledgement of the importance of doctrine, the defenders of unity would acquire a stronger basis to ask for greater commitment to institutional unity. A daunting venture, no doubt: but surely preferable to the present state of distrust. Who knows, it might bring us somewhere else than a law court.

The Rev'd. Gavin G. Dunbar

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