

Grace Notes

Easter 2008

In the previous edition of this newsletter, I tried to set out, in broad outline, the divergent positions of two groups within The Episcopal Church, the "orthodox" and the "progressives," and I invited you to consider which most nearly represents what you believe. Now I'd like to take a look at just one of several possible ways of explaining how and why the progressives have strayed from the traditional teaching of the Christian faith, not just about human sexuality, but also about the Scriptures, Jesus, and the gospel itself.

Rector's Ruminations

The Doctrine of Inclusivity

If any "doctrine" may be said to have guided The Episcopal Church (TEC) in its decisions, actions, and pronouncements over the past fifty years or so, it is what I would call the "doctrine of inclusivity." The rallying cry of the progressive leadership over that period has been "we need to be an inclusive church," one that allows equal access to all people, regardless of racial, ethnic, socio-economic, theological, or sexual differences. I dare say this is the one non-negotiable tenet of the official TEC stance toward the world and the rest of the Church. Everything else can and will be sacrificed, it would appear, on the "altar" of inclusiveness.

Now I doubt very much that anyone enjoys being excluded by a larger group. But it is one thing to *be excluded*, and another to *exclude yourself*. Back in the days of racial segregation, blacks were discriminated against and excluded from white society because of the color of their skin. They did not exclude themselves (except perhaps on the more radical fringes of the civil rights movement, where leaders like Malcolm X advocated the formation of a separate black society). Exclusion *of them by others* was the sin of discrimination and racism, and was rightly opposed in the name of equal rights and access for all citizens, regardless of skin color or racial background.

Frankly, I suspect that it was largely out of guilt over a failure to be in the forefront of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s that influential voices in TEC began shortly thereafter to push an agenda dominated by the cry for inclusivity within the church. This insistence appears to have had an impact on the church's decisions in several different areas over the following decades.

Theological indifferentism

Up until the 1950s, The Episcopal Church had been a very traditional Christian body, holding in common with most of the rest of the Church the historic teachings handed down through the centuries. A critical test of this teaching arose in that decade when Bishop James Pike publicly declared that "the Church's classical way of stating what is represented by the doctrine of the Trinity is . . . not essential to the Christian faith." When, as a bishop and authorized teacher of the church, he refused to recant his heretical views, TEC chose not to discipline or depose him, but rather merely to censure, or express displeasure with, him for them. Pike continued to drift away from historic Christian teaching, and he died a tragically disillusioned man, but remained to the end a bishop in good standing in TEC.

The precedent was clearly established: anyone, even a bishop, who took heretical stands with regard to church teaching was nonetheless still to be included within the church. Therefore, when Bishop John Spong went far beyond Pike and ridiculed not just the doctrine of the Trinity but the very idea of a personal God, and then proceeded to reject outright the Deity and Resurrection of Jesus, TEC still could find no basis for disciplining him. He was allowed both to advocate heresy and to take part in the councils of the church, all in the name of inclusivity.

Remarriage of divorced persons

Another change that took place in the 1960s, following hard on both Bishop Pike and the civil rights movement, was a revision of the canons (laws) of TEC to permit those who had been divorced to remarry in the church. It was argued at the time that this was a "pastoral provision" for innocent parties in divorce cases, but the result of the change was the inclusion of offending parties as well, on the basis that, well, after all, no one could or should be excluded from the right to remarry after divorce. The doctrine of inclusivity was beginning to make itself felt in the social as well as in the theological sphere.

Ordination of women

The next innovation adopted by TEC was the acceptance of women for ordination to the priesthood. Up until the 1970s, priesthood in the Episcopal Church, like in the Roman

Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, was exclusively male. The conception of a male priesthood, however, ran afoul of the doctrine of inclusivity and, predictably, was quite expeditiously expanded to permit women to have equal access to Holy Orders. This happened with virtually no theological debate or justification. It was put forward as a civil rights issue and defended primarily on the basis of “fairness” and “justice”.

Ordination of gays and blessing of same-sex “unions”

This brings us to the issue of the day. Applying the same logic that was used to justify a priesthood without sexual distinction, TEC has demanded full inclusion in the life and ministry of the church for all persons without regard to sexual lifestyle or practice. For now this means primarily gay men and lesbians, but it will undoubtedly be extended in future to include bisexuals (those who have sexual relations with members of both sexes) and those of other, more exotic, persuasions. These persons have a right, so the argument goes, to be ordained just like heterosexuals are, and to have their relationships blessed and sacramentalized, just as “straight” folks do. It is therefore wrong, and a sin, to exclude them from these privileges.

The argument of those who oppose this innovation and departure from traditional Christian moral teaching is that practicing homosexuals are *excluding themselves* through the practice and advocacy of behaviors that are morally unacceptable. The Church indeed must be welcoming to all, in obedience to Jesus’ command to “go into *all the world* and make disciples of *all nations*, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19), but she can only truly be *inclusive* if she is first, in faithfulness to her Lord, *exclusive* of those who refuse to repent of their sins and believe the gospel of God’s redeeming and transforming love in Christ.

To those who would say that practicing homosexuals are being unfairly singled out in a church that is full of sinners, my reply is that, so far as I am aware, the other sinners (i.e., the rest of us) do not hold their sinful behaviors up for emulation, celebration, and blessing. Wherever sin raises its ugly head in the church it ought to be decried and repented of. “Go,” says Jesus to us all, straight and gay, “and sin no more” (John 8:11).

No turning back

On reflection, it seems to me that the “besetting sin” of The Episcopal Church over this past half century is precisely the sin of indiscriminate inclusion. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be any indication that TEC is willing to repent of it and thereby cease to exclude itself from the rest of the Anglican Communion and separate itself from those other Christian bodies that uphold the traditional understanding and teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Quite to the contrary, the Presiding Bishop and the House of

Bishops have made clear that there can be no turning back for TEC from the stated goal of full inclusion of practicing homosexuals, because “justice” and “conscience” demand it, no matter what the dissenting voices of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason may say.

Ironically enough, the one constituency for which TEC appears to have no room anymore is those who hold traditional, orthodox positions on human sexuality and other theological issues. Most of us, however, do not complain of being excluded, because we realize that, by our defense of the integrity of the gospel, we are, in the end, excluding ourselves. But with Martin Luther (and Bishop Duncan) we say, “Here we stand, we can do no other.”

In the Pentecost issue of this newsletter, I will address the question of what we as a parish can and ought to do, in light of these considerations. Meanwhile, please continue to pray for me and the members of our vestry, that we may lead this parish forward in the way God would have us to go, and be assured that you are all in my prayers regularly.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

Fr. John

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“Come and see, follow and grow, go and tell!”