

Grace Notes

Lent 2008

Those of you who have been around Grace Church for awhile will recognize the large heading above as the name of the erstwhile parish newsletter, which last appeared in Lent of 2007 and only very erratically for several years before that. I have decided to "resurrect" it, not as a full-blown newsletter (for which an editor able to generate lots of "copy" would be needed, along with someone skilled in graphic design), but as a means of communicating with members of the parish on a regular basis as we go through this decisive year in the life of our diocese.

Rector's Ruminations

The ongoing controversy

I am occasionally asked by newcomers and oldtimers alike, "What's all this controversy I keep hearing of in the Episcopal Church? Is it really about sexuality?" The answer to the second part of that question is, yes, it is really about sexuality, but it's also about much more than that! It's about very basic and very important differences in the way two groups within The Episcopal Church (TEC) read the Bible, understand the gospel, and look at the world. On the one hand, there are the conservatives, who prefer to refer to themselves as the "orthodox," and on the other there are the liberals, who prefer to refer to themselves as the "progressives." At the heart of the matter is a fundamental difference in what these two groups believe, a difference so great as to lead some to suggest that there are, in reality, not one but two religions or worldviews within TEC.

A reality check: What do you believe?

Read carefully across the two columns on the second page and the top of the third, taking each point in turn for purposes of comparison. As you do this, ask yourself: which of these two alternatives more nearly describes what I believe?

I believe that...

- The Bible is the Word of God, written by men inspired by the Holy Spirit; as faithfully interpreted by the Church under the guidance of that same Spirit, in accordance with Tradition and reason, it is authoritative for our lives today
- The eternal Son of God took flesh from the Virgin Mary and became the man we know as Jesus, who was truly God and truly man; he died on the cross, rose bodily from the tomb, and ascended into heaven, becoming thereby the only way to the Father and the only mediator between God and man; he comes to indwell all those who repent of their sins and believe in him and are baptized in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit
- Christians are empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to Jesus and are given the “Great Commission” by Jesus himself to share the good news of God’s redeeming love with everyone so that others may believe and become his disciples: “Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19)
- Only those who have been baptized should be allowed to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion
- Sexual relations are permissible only for a man and a woman who are married to each other; therefore, the Church cannot bless in God’s name

I believe that...

- or** • The Bible is a human book, written by men whose views reflect the prejudices of their times; it constantly needs to be corrected by more enlightened minds; and it is binding on us only so far as we agree with what it says
- or** • Born in the normal way, Jesus, a Jewish rabbi with an extraordinarily strong sense of his oneness with God, showed his followers one of many ways by which human beings can find God within; when he died and was buried his body remained in the tomb but his spirit continued with his disciples and now lives in all people because they were created by God in his/her image, with all their natural inclinations, and are accepted by him/her as they are
- or** • Christians should refrain from attempts to proselytize people of other faiths out of respect for their belief systems and so as not to offend them; our primary emphasis should not be on spreading the gospel of God’s redeeming love and sharing our faith, but on the elimination of social and economic ills through support of such programs as the United Nations’ Millennial Development Goals
- or** • Communion should be offered to the unbaptized, if they desire to receive it, as a matter of hospitality
- or** • Sexual relations between two men or between two women are proper and appropriate if they are living in a committed relationship; therefore,

any sexual relationship outside of the sacrament of marriage, nor can it ordain to Holy Orders someone who is not either married or living a celibate way of life

the Church must bless any committed relationship between two adults, and all baptized persons have a right to ordination regardless of their sexual practice

In this little “test,” I’ve attempted to highlight the difference that exists between the two groups by summarizing the approach taken by each in five key areas of descending importance. The first column represents the positions held by those who think of themselves as “orthodox,” and the second gives the contrasting view of those on the “progressive” side. (*Note of caution:* While I do think that the beliefs stated in the first column accurately reflect those held by the orthodox, because they are clearly set forth in the creeds and teachings of the universal Church, I do not mean to suggest that all the beliefs in the second column are held by everyone who describes him or herself as “progressive.” I would, however, say that they fairly represent the majority position and trend of the leadership of the Episcopal Church, as reflected in official statements and actions.)

I’ve included differences in the area of sexuality here because they are unquestionably at issue, but please notice that, instead of being at the top of the chart, they are at the bottom! The really profound matters have to do with the authority and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, the deity and sole mediatorial role of Jesus Christ, and the mission of the Church to the world. On these, as well as on human sexuality, the orthodox and the progressives are badly – one might even say, I fear, hopelessly – divided.

Where the parish leadership stands

As those who consider Grace to be your parish, you deserve to know where I, your rector and a priest of the church, “come down” on all this. I can say unequivocally that I hold the beliefs stated in the first column, and that I consider myself to belong among the “orthodox.” This does not mean, however--I hasten to add--that if you hold one or more of the contrasting beliefs you are not welcome at Grace! It only means that you may not expect those beliefs to be preached or taught here so long as I am your rector. Quite frankly, my hope for those who differ is what St. Paul says regarding those who are “otherwise minded”: that “God will reveal that also to you” (Philippians 3:15).

I am pleased to be able to report that both the assisting clergy of the parish and your elected vestry are all of one accord in their support of the “orthodox” position. Each of us is more than happy to talk with you about any misgivings, concerns, or questions that you may have about the issues that I’ve identified, and I can assure you that our guiding principle in any such discussions will be to listen carefully and to seek to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15).

In the next issue of this newsletter, to be published in the Season of Easter, I will address the question of the course of action your vestry and I believe that we need to take together. Meanwhile, know that you are in my prayers daily, and please pray for me and for the vestry, that we may lead this parish forward in the way that God would have us go.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

Fr. John

P.S. Here, by way of reminder, is our parish mission statement, adopted last year by the vestry: *"We are a high-church Anglican parish that worships with the traditional prayer-book liturgy of Holy Eucharist, proclaims Jesus Christ alone as the 'Way, the Truth, and the Life,' and stands firm for the Trinitarian Faith founded on Holy Scripture and set forth in the Creeds. Our threefold purpose is to spread the gospel of God's redeeming and transforming love; to build up 'the one, holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church'; and to make disciples of our Lord."*

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"Come and see, follow and grow, go and tell!"