

HOPE FOR AN ERRING CHURCH

Summary of a talk given to the Halifax Chapter of Anglican Essentials, July 17/09

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Corporately and individually, many of us face a crisis over how to respond to our church, the Anglican Church of Canada, in its slippery slope toward grievous error on the part of many of its leaders and members over the issue of same-sex blessing.

I am indebted to the work of theologian Ephraim Radner, who in his book Hope Among the Fragments, provides a cogent biblical and theological rationale for biblically-oriented Anglicans to resist the temptation to seek greener theological pastures.

First, we suffer in Western culture from the unintended results of the Reformation. The legacy of inter-church violence plunged Europe into more than one hundred years of civil war, in which up to a third of Europe's population was killed in the name of competing versions of doctrinal Christian truth.

The sense of a catholic Christianity united in one body, gave way to competing Christian groups, each adamant that its version of truth was unassailable. A religious market-place opened up, where it became a virtue to choose which version of Christian doctrine was preferable to the others. Today, Christianity in its many forms is a 'product' more or less aggressively marketed.

We can barely estimate how grievously this fragmentation and market culture has harmed our witness in the eyes of the unbelieving world!

Despite our opposition to same-sex blessings, which is after all just the tip of the ice-berg, there are many of us who do not wish to further the continued fragmentation of the Body of Christ. We trust God to restore truth to his church. We will not further divide it. No Christian 'fragment' of the Church can claim unsullied theological and moral truth. No 'denomination' is in a position to easily excommunicate any other.

My second reason for 'staying put' (Radner) and 'standing firm' is the example of the Old Testament prophets and our Lord Jesus Christ. Some folk have chosen the biblical model of Elijah on Mount Carmel in his standing for truth against the prophets of Ba'al: "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him..." (I Kings 18:21).

But there is another biblical model, that of the Exile of God's people in Babylon around 600 BCE. In Jeremiah 29:4f, the prophet urges the Jews to hunker down amongst the Babylonians. They are to build houses, plant gardens, marry and give their children in marriage. They are to "multiply and not decrease". They are to seek the welfare of Babylon and pray for it, for as their captors flourish so will Israel in Exile.

The orthodox in the ACC, is a people in Exile. We wait on God alone to come to our aid. In the meantime, we are hunkering down, working for the good of the whole church, seeking to evangelize and build godly and biblical parishes, praying in repentance and sorrow, and yet, in unflagging hope, waiting for God to cleanse and renew his people, including us!

Neither Old Testament prophets, nor Jesus himself separated from sinful Israel. They were adamant, even fierce, in their prophetic critique. Jesus challenged and corrected the Temple, but always from within, from commitment and participation. Indeed, the Cross

A third reason derives from the embeddedness of the figure of Marriage throughout the whole of Scripture beginning to end. Space forbids elaboration, but consider the example of Hosea, called to bring home his unfaithful wife, Gomer. Just as Marriage is agonistic in this world that is conflicted and in struggle against such enemies as despair, betrayal, boredom, and anger; so is life in God's church which, as Luther pointed out, is both holy and sinful at one and the same time. As Hosea is called to reconcile with unfaithful Gomer, so are we called to reach out in love (NOT IN ACQUIESCENCE) to our liberal sisters and brothers in the church.

"But will I be able to grow spiritually in this erring church?" ask some. There will be ample opportunities for following Jesus Christ, to learning his humility and his boldness, and to minister to the many in the ACC who have been led astray like sheep without a shepherd. We will be driven to a deeper kind of prayer, in which the Holy Spirit will intercede for us "with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). We will learn how to bear witness to the truth – while maintaining what unity we can. Why stay? "Because it is the most evangelical thing one might do..." (Radner, p.210).