

Judgment Begins at the Household of God

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What is God doing in the Anglican Communion? This, of course, is a matter of discernment. Such discernment, however, is not a private matter, but must be judged corporately. So, to that end, consider the following:

Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees -- that is, their hypocrisy. Everything that is now covered will be uncovered, and everything now hidden will be made clear. For this reason, whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in hidden places will be proclaimed on the housetops. (Luke 12:2-3)

The time has come for the judgment to begin at the household of God; and if what we know now is only the beginning, what will it be when it comes down to those who refuse to believe God's Good News? (1 Peter 4:17)

I am the true vine and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that bears no fruit he cuts away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to make it bear even more. (John 15:1-2)

Let us now go back about two centuries.

At the start of the 19th century a new theological perspective began in the West, introduced by such figures and movements as Schleiermacher and the History of Religion school. Among other things, its partisans devised a way of understanding the faith that denied the miraculous and reduced Scripture to the literature of an ancient people.(1) With the passage of time, this false teaching made its way into a number of theological institutions, including Episcopal seminaries.

Certain seminary graduates, men like Bishop Pike, and in our day, Bishop Spong, were willing to proclaim this false teaching and its immoral corollaries as a new truth. At first, the new teaching was simply seen as an aberration. Soon, however, it became official doctrine, proclaimed and promoted at the highest levels of the Episcopal Church.(2) At that moment, what had been hidden became clear. What had been done in the dark, the immorality of it all, was proclaimed from the housetops. Finally, at last, judgment began at the household of God.

There is, however, more to it than false teaching and rank immorality. Throughout the time period under discussion, in fact, at all times and places,

there was and is a deep idolatry that infects the Church. Indeed, it afflicts all of us. That idolatry is to place the Church, its leaders, esteem, and privilege, above Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture and interpreted by the tradition. As long as the Church was officially orthodox, a significant portion of this idolatry was virtually invisible. But once the heterodox seized control of the Church and dispensed its perks and prestige, the idolatry was made clear. At that point, the judgment came home to all of us. Let me give an example.

Early in the decade of the 1990s, the Episcopal Diocese of Kansas elected a moderate/conservative bishop. After a few years in the House of Bishops, he had a change of heart. He adopted the new inclusive vision. When questioned, this bishop could give no real theological or biblical justification for his new perspective. In the late 1990s, he announced the new "gospel" to his diocese. Immediately, all but a handful of clergy went along to get along. They remained in eucharistic fellowship with the bishop, and through him, with a national Church sliding into apostasy.

A number of these clergy doubtless considered themselves orthodox, but they would not break eucharistic fellowship with a Church that so clearly had abandoned the faith. The laity, by and large, followed their priests, just as their priests had followed their bishop. All preferred the security of buildings, friends, family traditions, steady income, acceptance of their peers, and ease of going along to get along.

Now, perhaps, it could be said that these clergy should have broken eucharistic fellowship with the bishop, and through him, the Episcopal Church. This has been exhaustively discussed,⁽³⁾ and therefore, I will make only two comments.

It is absolutely, utterly obvious, utterly clear to anyone with a minimal understanding of orthodoxy, that decisive teaching and practice of the leadership of the Episcopal Church is not the Christian faith as it has been received. All one needs to do is to consider such things as Bishop Spong's twelve theses, or note the comportment of Bishop Robinson, or observe what the Episcopalians did and did not pass at their last convention, or read the public statements of Presiding Bishop Schori, or peruse the Episcopal Bishops' talking points at Lambeth, to know that this is true.

Secondly, it is utterly clear, absolutely obvious, that Scripture, tradition, and Anglican prayer books, as understood by the Church through the centuries, demand that the faithful break eucharistic fellowship with those who promote false doctrine and egregious immorality. Again, this is utterly obvious, and I have never heard anyone claim that eucharistic discipline has not been the practice of the Church from the beginning.

At every level, from local parish, to diocese, to national Church, a choice was made: to choose Jesus Christ as known in Scripture and the tradition or to

choose the Church. By and large, the vast majority chose the Church with the result that the idolatry was no longer hidden, but shouted from the housetops.

That idolatry is now being revealed to the whole of the Anglican Communion. Throughout the Anglican Communion, priests, bishops, and dioceses have been subverted by money, perks, and programs. Others, such as those at GAFCON, have been willing to go against the stream and stand for the faith once delivered to the saints. They, in my view, have chosen Jesus Christ over the Church.

Many, however, belong to the great "middle," and they, if the past be tutor to the present, will go with the leadership of the Anglican Communion, namely, the Archbishop of Canterbury. In that regard, let me make a few observations on the Archbishop of Canterbury's Presidential Address to the assembled bishops, an address which set the tone for the Lambeth Conference.⁽⁴⁾ Subtly, but surely, that address proclaimed the Church as the norm for the assembled bishops, rather than obedience to Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture and interpreted by the tradition.

To begin with, the Archbishop never asks the bishops to measure the teaching of the Episcopal Church against sound doctrine, and if unorthodox, to consider the possibility of breaking eucharistic fellowship. Rather, he is looking for transformed relationships, namely, that all present would learn to trust each other and manifest a "constant active involvement in the life of other parts of the family."

To make this happen, the bishops must be "ready to listen to what someone else is saying and not leap to hostile or suspicious conclusions." They must learn to be "more lovingly engaged with each other," and thereby "develop new habits of respect, patience, and understanding," so that "everyone's voice has a chance of being heard" and "everyone is confident that they haven't been manipulated, bullied or ignored."

This "mutual listening and restraint for the sake of each other" has a goal: "so that it remains possible to see in the other person another believer, another redeemed sinner, another person on the way to transformation in Christ." And if that goal is met, they can reach a "shared perspective on things, even if they don't yet agree." Such an outcome would be owned "by the greatest possible number of people involved," something that an "overwhelming majority felt they had shaped for themselves."

At no point, ever, does the Archbishop starkly confront the assembled bishops with a choice, either Jesus Christ or the Church. In times of apostasy, that is the choice, the only decisive choice. Rather, the Archbishop conflates Christ and the Church. He makes the assumption that those present constitute the Church, so that each can see in the other "another believer," another person "on the way to transformation in Christ." And if all belong to Christ, then decisions made by the

"overwhelming majority" would accord with Christ. This is because "all our existing bonds of friendship and fellowship are valuable and channels of grace, even if some want to give such bonds a more formal and demanding shape." This statement, in concise form, summarizes the idolatry, and the process which puts flesh on the idolatry is the mutual listening and earnest dialogue of the Lambeth Conference.(5)

Why is this idolatry? It is idolatrous because Jesus Christ defines the Church and the means of grace and not conversely. Jesus Christ is the vine and his Father cuts off branches as he sees fit. Once separated from the vine, such branches are no longer channels of grace. They are thrown into the fire and burned. For that reason, it cannot be assumed that "all our existing bonds of friendship and fellowship are valuable and channels of grace, ..."

Now, it might seem that these claims of mine are rather presumptuous, as if I can discern what groups are, or are not, joined to the vine. In fact, the Archbishop might well say that I have adopted what he calls a "total perspective." By "total perspective," he means "the attempt to take God's point of view." (6) The Archbishop doesn't believe that anyone can take God's point of view. Two comments are in order.

First, the Reformers made a distinction between the visible and invisible Church. The visible Church was known by its marks, sound doctrine and eucharistic discipline being two of them. The invisible Church was known only to God. To break eucharistic fellowship with the Episcopal Church, to exclude her from the Communion, is not to claim that she has become a dead branch. God the Father makes that decision. It is simply to claim that, by the objective norms of orthodox faith and morals, the Episcopal Church can no longer belong to the visible Church.

As Richard Hooker phrases it, "As for the act of excommunication, it neither shutteth out from the mystical [the invisible Church], nor clean from the visible, but only from fellowship with the visible in holy duties." (7) In other words, excommunication does not automatically remove one from the vine, that is God's decision. It does, however, exclude the faithless from "holy duties," above all, Holy Eucharist.(8)

Secondly, when the Archbishop claims that "all our existing bonds of friendship and fellowship are valuable and channels of grace," he is speaking from a "total perspective." He is claiming to know how God dispenses grace. In fact, the governing assumption of the Archbishop's address is that all the assembled bishops are believers, that is, they belong to the vine. This claim implies a "total perspective." In the Archbishop's view, those who use a "total perspective" are pursuing political power by covert means.(9) If the Archbishop is right, his address is more political than pious, an attempt to include everybody, even the North Americans with their false doctrine and immoral practices.

In this regard, I really do not know who belongs to the vine or who does not. It is not my decision. Nor, similarly, do I perfectly discern what God is or is not doing in the Anglican Communion. My comments on God's judging the Anglican Communion are made in faith. We are, after all, called to discern the signs of the times. There are, however, objective norms of orthodoxy, and a mark of the true Church is to exercise eucharistic discipline according to these norms. Unless that happens, Anglicanism is doomed.

Finally, what will be the result of the Lambeth Conference? If matters go as they have gone at the level of dioceses and provinces, a significant number of bishops and their flocks will follow the inclusive vision of Canterbury. Some of them will claim to be orthodox, but even so, they, like their leader, will try to keep everyone in the "family."

They will try to broker a compromise, or set up emergency structures, or hatch one scheme after another, all the while refusing to break eucharistic fellowship with the Episcopal Church. They will be like a man on an ice floe, watching a crack widen beneath his feet and refusing to choose one side or another.

The judgment of God, however, will go on unabated. The crack will become a chasm. God will cut off the unproductive branches and prune the rest. Visibly, the Church will split. The severed branches will wither and die, a process of years.

There is only one thing to do: follow the lead of GAFCON. Its members recognized that the issue is far more than sexuality. Even if the Episcopal Church were to follow Windsor's recommendations on sexuality (the unimaginable), the Episcopal Church would still be promoting heretical versions of the Christian faith. That is the real issue.

The GAFCON document, "The Way, the Truth, and the Life" goes to the heart of the matter, documenting the pervasive false teaching that infects the West. GAFCON has broken fellowship and proclaimed the faith once delivered to the saints in the Jerusalem Declaration. That is the way forward. Those in the "middle" may wring their hands and scramble around trying to "save" the Anglican Communion, but really, there is no need for all the fuss. All one needs to do is stand firm, break eucharistic fellowship with those who have betrayed the faith,⁽¹⁰⁾ pray for all involved, and be thankful that God is judging his Church. We need it.

Endnotes

1. The document, "The Way, the Truth, and the Life," produced by the GAFCON theological committee, was surely right to specify as error the denial of the miraculous and the reduction of Scripture to nothing more than the time-bound literature of an ancient people.

2. See the insightful article by Joseph Bottum, "The Death of Protestant America," *First Things* (August/September, 2008), pp. 26-9. In regard to Presiding Bishop Schori, he comments, "Her Yahweh, in other words, is a blend of Norman Vincent Peale and Dag Hammarskjöld." (p. 27)
3. I and others have repeatedly addressed this matter. See, for example, my web page, www.rsanders.org. [<http://www.rsanders.org./>](http://www.rsanders.org/)
4. http://www.episcopalchurch.org/79901_99149_ENG_HTM.htm
5. A theological justification for the "mutual listening and earnest dialogue" of Lambeth can be found in the St. Andrew's Draft. A false doctrine of the Trinity undergirds this document. See <http://rsanders.org/The%20St.%20Andrew's%20Draft.htm>.
6. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), p. 6.
7. Hooker, *Lawes*, III,i,13.
8. Hooker knew the tradition. When he states that excommunication does not cut off "clean from the visible," he may well have been thinking of penance in which those disciplined by eucharistic exclusion were still under the oversight of the Church, provided of course, they accepted penitential discipline. They were not, however, allowed the Eucharist for that was the essence of the penance.
9. *On Christian Theology*, p. 4. According to the Archbishop, the remedy for the tyranny of the "total perspective" is genuine and continuing conversation. "Honest discourse permits response and continuation; it invites collaboration by showing that it does not claim to be, in and of itself, final." (*On Christian Theology*, p. 5.) In practice, however, endless conversation is the tactic of choice for revisionists who, once they have the votes, will end the conversation. This has been the Episcopal experience for decades. From what I can tell, that tactic has now been applied to the Lambeth Conference.
10. The word "faith" in this sentence is used as Hooker used it. It means the objective standards of orthodox truth (*Lawes*, III,i,5). It is not a claim to know who really believes, or who is saved, or who isn't. The Archbishop, however, frames the discussion in terms of the invisible church -- seeing Christ in others, recognizing others as believers, believing others belong to the true Church, and so forth. This will get nowhere because, without objective criteria, no real decisions will ever be made. Instead, there is endless conversation, hoping for that mystical moment when we see each other as one in Christ.

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