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A 'Season of Gracious Restraint?' Not Likely.

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The 2008 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops ended with something more like a whimper than a bang. The once-a-decade meeting of bishops of the Anglican Communion was a matter of controversy long before it started. In an unprecedented move, over 200 conservative bishops boycotted the meeting and held their own gathering in Jerusalem a few weeks before the Lambeth conclave. The 650 bishops who did attend had faced one unavoidable question — will the Anglican Communion survive?



Anglicans — like most denominations — are no strangers to controversy. But the stresses and strains in the Anglican Communion have clearly reached the breaking point. Some of the tensions can be traced back to the historical roots of the church and the attempt to forge a national church out of the turmoil of English history. In more recent years the church has claimed a principle of “comprehensiveness” that has produced the radical doctrinal diversity that is now tearing the church apart.

The Anglican Communion includes the Church of England and other national churches associated with that church and its primate, the Archbishop of Canterbury. In the United States that church has been the Episcopal Church U.S., which made its break from the Church of England in the course of the American Revolution. Virtually all of the member churches are evidence of the long reach of the British Empire and the missionary efforts of the Church of England.

Now, it is the Anglican churches in Africa and other regions of the “Global South” that represent the conservative energy in the communion. The Church of England, and to an ever greater extent, the Episcopal Church in the U.S. and the Anglican Church of Canada, represent the liberal centers of influence. The current crisis was caused by moves within those churches to normalize homosexual behaviors by blessing same-sex unions and ordaining practicing homosexuals to the priesthood. The issue exploded when the Episcopal Church confirmed an openly-homosexual man as Bishop of New Hampshire.

That action took place five years ago yesterday when the Episcopal Church confirmed the election of Gene Robinson as the first openly-homosexual bishop of any church in the Anglican Communion. Since then the Episcopal Church has resisted all efforts, both from within and without, to bring the church to repentance and correction.

The Anglican Communion has thus become a parable of what happens when theological diversity is celebrated and doctrinal heresy is allowed to continue without confrontation and correction. The current turmoil in the Anglican Communion is a powerful reminder that “comprehensiveness” *always* has limits.

Anglican theologian J.I. Packer, who resigned from his affiliation with the Canadian Diocese of New Westminster because of that diocese’s blessing of same-sex unions, once spoke of Anglican comprehensiveness as both virtue and vice. It is a virtue when it allows Christians united in doctrinal essentials to worship and minister together. It becomes a vice when it is used as a cover for heresy.

In “[A Kind of Noah’s Ark? The Anglican Commitment to Comprehensiveness.](#)” Packer lamented the misuse of comprehensiveness as a principle within his church. The virtuous principle has been transformed into the vice:

Sadly, however, the present-day reality of Anglican comprehensiveness is not like that. It is both more complex and more painful. There are two reasons for this. One is that since biblical criticism, in the sense of systematic study of the origins, composition, literary character and purpose of the biblical books as human documents, established itself in the Protestant world a century ago, many Anglicans have ceased to view Bible doctrine as God's revealed truth, and no longer let biblical thoughts determine their thinking. Allowing Scripture great human authority as a primary witness to archetypal Christian experience, they deny it divine authority as instruction from heaven. So at every turn we find them distinguishing divine realities from New Testament ideas about them, and refusing to concede that they lose touch with the former by questioning the latter. But to those who believe that the Holy Spirit spoke by the prophets and their apostolic counterparts, making biblical testimony as truly God's utterance as were the words of the incarnate Son, and who take the fundamentals to be just what Scripture says they are, the claim to uphold those fundamentals while relativizing or recasting Scripture statements about them seems incoherent nonsense. Thus discussion of fundamentals falls into deep confusion, and the question whether there is essential agreement on what is essential to the essentials becomes problematical to the last degree.

The schism within the Anglican Communion was theological long before it became organizational. There are Anglicans who are determined to normalize homosexual behavior and relationships and those who see this normalization as the outright rejection of the clear teachings of the Bible. There are Anglicans who will not remain in a church that blesses homosexuality and there are others who will not remain in a church that will *not* bless homosexuality.

But the underlying issues are of even greater importance. This is a struggle between those who are determined to maintain the faith "once for all delivered to the saints" and those who see the Christian faith as endlessly and necessarily negotiable. The church long ago forfeited any shared commitment to biblical authority, to theological orthodoxy, to scriptural norms of human sexuality. Many of the bishops who press the case for normalizing homosexuality also reject the exclusivity of salvation through Christ and a host of other doctrinal essentials. Homosexuality is the fuse, not the bomb.

Rowan Williams, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, attempted to avoid outright schism by announcing ahead of time that the 2008 Lambeth Conference would avoid putting any issue, however essential, to a vote. Instead, the bishops met in discussion groups and, in the end, released a document entitled "[Reflections Upon the Lambeth Conference 2008](#)." That document, long and bureaucratic, is evidence of a church that cannot and will not make up its mind. The document is itself a reflection of all the positions represented by the attending bishops. It includes the Archbishop of Canterbury's plea for a "season of gracious restraint" that would require that liberals adopt a moratorium on blessing homosexual unions and ordaining homosexual priests and that conservatives would adopt a moratorium on "cross-border incursions" by conservative bishops.

Even before the bishops headed home, several American bishops made their rejection of the moratorium clear. Los Angeles Bishop Jon Bruno said that those who think his diocese would change its direction are "sadly mistaken." Katherine Jefferts Schori, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, a vocal proponent of liberalization, described the turmoil in the Anglican Communion in terms of "suffering the birth pangs of something new." The Bishop of Washington (D.C.), John Chane described the efforts of conservatives as "demonic."

In other words, don't expect to see a "season of gracious restraint."

We discussed the turmoil in the Anglican Communion on Tuesday's edition of *The Albert Mohler Program* [[listen here](#)]. My guest was Rev. Canon George Conger, a priest of the Diocese of Central Florida and Chief Correspondent for the *Church of England Newspaper*. I asked Rev. Conger to look ahead and predict if a 2018 meeting of the Lambeth Conference seemed possible. He response was that it would not even seem possible that such any unity sufficient for such a meeting would exist just a year from now. He also stated that the Episcopal Church, U.S. is no longer one church at all, as it is so deeply divided over essential theological issues. His candor, spoken with honest sadness and lament, is rare and much appreciated.

