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The Anglican Debate Sharpens -Lessons for the Whole Church

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Tuesday, March 8, 2005

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In one sense, the Archbishop—titular head of the Anglican Communion and Primate of the Church of England—was just expressing the obvious. Yet, in the context of a likely schism in the Anglican Communion, his words landed like a bomb.

“There can be no cost-free outcome” to the current controversies, the Archbishop warned, adding that the Anglican Communion could not split “cleanly.”

The world-wide Anglican Communion has been embroiled in a controversy over homosexuality that broke out with a fever pitch when the Episcopal Church USA [ECUSA] ordained an openly homosexual man—living in an open sexual relationship with his partner—as bishop of New Hampshire. In doing so, the American church acted in open defiance of the 1998 Lambeth Conference agreement, which was supposed to put the issue to rest—at least for a matter of years. The rebellious action of the American church—and the action of Canadian Anglicans in blessing same-sex unions—has set the stage for what most observers expect will be a bitter division over fundamental issues of biblical authority, church doctrine, and human sexuality.

The text of the statement released by the Primates was bureaucratic in tone, but revolutionary in effect: “We request that the Episcopal Church (USA) and the Anglican Church of Canada voluntarily withdraw their members from the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC).” A few Anglican leaders tried to put a happy face on the action, claiming that this move was intended to buy time to prevent the Anglican Communion from reaching a point of immediate division. “What we are doing is creating a space,” said Australian Archbishop Peter Carnley. For his part, Frank Griswold, Presiding Bishop of the ECUSA, said he interpreted the request as an act that “gives space for speaking and listening.”

All this comes just months after Anglicans adopted the “Windsor Report,” which called upon the American and Canadian churches to repent and bring themselves into alignment with the larger church.

That is simply not likely to happen. Speaking after the Primates’ action, Bishop Griswold responded: “I think the regret we can offer wholeheartedly and as a unified body is regret for the consequences our actions have had in other contexts. But that does not mean that we necessarily regret the action itself. Certainly, I, having participated in the ordination of the bishop of New Hampshire, do not regret having done so, though I recognize the complexities that that action has had in other places and regret the pain that it’s caused other people.”

In other words, Bishop Griswold’s position is simply, “no pain, no gain.” Without using the words, he has expressed the sentiment clearly. He is willing to express “regret” for how the action of the American church has been received in

other nations, but he steadfastly and arrogantly refuses to express any regret for the profoundly unbiblical nature of the action itself.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has been doing his best to mollify the diverging factions in his church and to limit the immediate damage of the controversy that followed the ECUSA action. For the most part, Archbishop Williams has temporized and compromised. At the time of his installation in office, it was well known that the new Archbishop favored the ordination of active homosexuals and the blessing of same-sex unions. Nevertheless, largely due to outrage among Anglican conservatives, Williams has appeared to reverse course, dissuading an openly-gay Anglican cleric from accepting a post as suffragan bishop and asking the American and Canadian churches to respect the concerns of the larger Anglican Communion.

Therefore, Williams' observation that any permanent solution would require one side or the other to say, "Yes, we were wrong," amounts to something like a resignation to reality.

As for the Americans, Griswold isn't about to apologize, much less to admit that he and his church acted in a way that violates Christian truth, contradicts the clear teaching of the Bible, and will likely lead to the breakup of the Anglican Communion. Just after the Primates' action, Griswold told the British Broadcasting Corporation that the consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson—the openly gay man elected bishop of New Hampshire—had been "right and proper." Griswold went on to say, "I continue to feel that way about the decision and the action—recognizing that it is extremely problematic and difficult in many parts of the world."

Griswold squashed any anticipation that he and his church might admit that they had acted wrongly. "I can't imagine a conversation saying we got it wrong," Griswold asserted. "I can see a conversation saying we should have been more aware of the effect that the decisions we took would have in other places."

Griswold would not even predict whether his church would accept the directive from the other Primates, explaining that he would have to consult with the other bishops in the United States in order to make a decision. In the meantime, he has made clear that he will continue to push an agenda toward the full normalization of homosexuality and full acceptance of homosexual unions and homosexual clergy.

For their part, conservative Anglicans expressed appreciation for the Primates' action. "We are thankful for the work of the Primates of the Anglican Communion in addressing the complicated issues for them this week," read a statement from the American Anglican Council and the Anglican Communion Network. "This is a pivotal moment in Anglican history in which Biblical faithfulness has been reaffirmed. At last a clear and unequivocal choice has been presented to the Episcopal Church USA and the Anglican Church of Canada. Being asked voluntarily to withdraw, the two provinces have been effectively suspended from the Communion until at least July 2008 in order to consider their place within that body. They must choose between repentance marked by compliance with the Windsor Report or continued theological innovations that separate them from the teachings and life of the Anglican Communion. We applaud the pastoral sensitivity with which the Primates have addressed the concerns of those who feel betrayed by their church leadership as well as those of homosexual orientation."

Ellis Brust, spokesman for the American Anglican Council claimed that the action had effectively taken the American and Canadian churches "to the woodshed." He further characterized the action as "a repudiation of the revisionist trends in North America and the upholding of biblical teaching and historical teaching of Anglicanism." One unnamed observer simply quipped: "The Primates have handed the North Americans a pearl-handled revolver."

The Reverend Dr. Kendall Harmon, canon theologian for the diocese of South Carolina and a well regarded Anglican figure, described the current controversy as "Anglicanism's greatest crisis since the Reformation." As he explained, "While the clash over sexuality makes the headlines, it is only the tip of the iceberg; underneath the debate about non-celibate same-sex relationships works the deeper issues of the authority and interpretation of scripture and the way authority is dispersed in the Church." North American liberals, he laments, "have embraced a new theology creating a third category of human existence other than single or married, and remain defiant in response to the calls of the Windsor Report." Looking toward the future, Reverend Harmon warns that a split in the Anglican Communion is "a risk that ought not to be minimized."

Liberals in the Anglican Communion were outraged by the Primates' action. Writing in *The Observer*, Will Hutton

argued that the “genius of the Anglican Church has been the depth of its embedded tolerance.” Expressing the most latitudinarian and broad-church concepts, Hutton argued that the Church of England and the Anglican Communion should “include and tolerate us all.”

Hutton points to the growing influence of evangelicals in the Anglican Communion, blaming conservatives in Great Britain and North America, and Anglican bishops throughout Africa, for bringing the church to this point of crisis. Hutton sides with the liberals, and dismisses evangelical concerns as simply outmoded and oppressive. As Hutton sees it, Archbishop Rowan Williams should confront the conservatives and support the American and Canadian churches.

Dr. George Carey, Williams’ immediate predecessor as Archbishop of Canterbury, told an American newspaper that he would prefer that the Anglican Communion would take a more “pragmatic” approach. Carey, identified as an evangelical upon election, disappointed conservatives during his tenure as head of the Anglican Communion, and his weak leadership largely opened the door for the chaos that his church now confronts.

That said, Carey’s comments are particularly instructive—in all the wrong ways: “A more pragmatic approach would say at the moment it is clear [that] to ordain practicing homosexuals would divide the church greatly, so let’s wait and see. In a way I take the pragmatic approach on this . . . we simply have to wait and see how the Holy Spirit is going to lead the Church in this . . . we must keep in step . . . otherwise we’ll become just a small sect.”

Taken alone, that statement should serve as sufficient explanation for how the Anglican Communion got into this trouble in the first place. When one of its leaders, who proudly wears the label evangelical, announces that his church should “wait and see” if the Holy Spirit will contradict Scripture, that church is in big trouble.

Observers will be watching the American and Canadian churches closely in order to gauge their responses and evaluate future actions. The two churches have been summoned to explain their actions before other Anglican bishops scheduled to meet later this year. If their most recent comments are any indication, the North American leaders show no desire for compromise, much less repentance. Inevitably, the question almost sure to face the Anglican Communion is the very issue awkwardly raised by George Carey. Will Anglicans settle for pragmatism over principle? The brave souls fighting for biblical authority and Christian truth deserve our prayer and encouragement.

