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An Alarm Sounds in London: Will It Matter?

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Conservatives will be disappointed that the group did not take direct action to expel the Episcopal Church (USA) from the Anglican Communion. Experienced observers of the work and ways of the Anglicans will not be surprised. Established as a “middle way” between Catholicism and Protestantism, the Church of England and its daughter churches around the world have always been known for moderate action and considerable diversity. The expulsion of the Episcopal Church would have been unprecedented, but the primates’ decision not to expel the church will likely lead to the very schism the leaders wanted to avoid.

The statement first established that the reason for the unusual convocation was “recent events in the diocese of New Westminster, Canada, and the Episcopal Church (USA).” The Canadian and American churches have acted unilaterally in multiple ways to endorse homosexuality. The Canadian diocese had adopted a Rite of Blessing for those in committed same sex relationships. The Episcopal Church (USA) elected Canon Gene Robinson, a divorced man living in a homosexual partnership, as Bishop of New Hampshire. These decisions were simply too much for orthodox Anglicans to take.

As the primates headed for London, conservatives seemed confident that they had gathered a majority ready to expel the American church and establish a new Anglican body within North America. Led by African leaders such as Nigerian Archbishop Peter Akinola, the primates knew in advance that schism was a very real possibility.

According to the statement, the actions of the Canadian and American churches “threaten the unity of our own Communion as well as our relationships with other parts of Christ’s Church, our mission and witness, and our relations with other faiths, in world already confused in areas of sexuality, morality, and theology, and polarized Christian opinion.”

The statement also made reference to the 1998 Lambeth Conference, at which the primates had affirmed that homosexuality is incompatible with Scripture. In true Anglican fashion, the primates called upon Dr. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, to establish a study commission charged to bring a report back to the group within twelve months.

The primates stated that the actions in New Westminster and the United States “do not express the mind of our Communion as a whole, and these decisions jeopardize our sacramental fellowship with each other.” The statement acknowledged that those who dissent from the pro-homosexual actions of the Canadian and American bodies may be forced by conscience to sever all ties with the offending churches. Furthermore, the statement left wide open the question

of whether the Anglican Communion will take any specific position on the sinfulness of homosexuality for their worldwide body of churches.

Given the stature of the American church, the decision by the Episcopal Church (USA) was what actually prompted this unusual gathering. "In most of our provinces," said the primates, "the election on Canon Gene Robinson would not have been possible since his chosen lifestyle would give rise to a canonical impediment to his consecration as a bishop." Conservatives will be encouraged to see that the thirty seven participating primates unanimously gave consent to a statement that described Cannon Robinson's lifestyle as chosen rather than given.

At the same time, evangelical Anglicans will be distressed to read the evasive language in the statement about biblical authority According to the statement, all the primates hold to a high view of Scripture. "Whilst we acknowledge a legitimate diversity of interpretation that arises in the Church, this diversity does not mean that some of us take the authority of Scripture more lightly than others." The statement continued: "Nevertheless, each province needs to be aware of the possible effects of its interpretation of Scripture on the life of other provinces in the Communion. We commit ourselves afresh to mutual respect while seeking from the Lord a correct discernment of how God's Word speaks to us in our contemporary world."

The problem with this statement should be obvious to any accustomed to reading the disingenuous evasions of official bureaucratic language. It is simply not true that the affirmation biblical authority unites these primates. This argument is patent nonsense and theological evasion. These words sound almost exactly like the language of the statement made this past summer by Bishop Frank Griswold, the presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church (USA), in his statement defending the election of the homosexual bishop.

Theological liberals seek to take cover under the claim that what separates liberal and conservatives is not our commitment to the authority of Scripture, but rather mere matters of interpretation. This is intellectually dishonest. Those pushing for acceptance of homosexuality are pushing against the clear and unambiguous teaching of Scripture.

The formation of yet another study commission is another bad sign. The issue of homosexuality in the Scripture requires no extensive study commission. The Scripture is consistently and explicitly clear in its denunciation of homosexuality in every form. There is no room for evasion and there is no problem of confusion in the text. Those who argue for the normalization of homosexuality do so in direct contradiction to the Holy Scripture. Under these circumstances, a study commission is more like a negotiated surrender of biblical authority and theological integrity.

The Church of England and its daughter churches of the Anglican Communion are established by constitution. At the center of their constitutional life is the confessional statement known as the "Thirty-Nine Articles." Article XX of the confession reads: "It is not lawful for the church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another." This is a classic statement of the evangelical Scripture principle. It states emphatically that the church is not free to ordain or approve anything contrary to God's Word. Thus, the scriptural condemnation of homosexuality is adequate and non-negotiable to establish that the church cannot normalize or accept, much less celebrate, homosexuality in any form. In addition, this article of the confession also requires a method of interpretation that does not place one scriptural text over against another. This is the usual technique of those to seek to subvert the Word of God from within the church.

Clear lines of division mark the debate over this issue. An exchange posted on the website for BBC News featured Dr. Philip Giddings, convener of Anglican Mainstream insisting that the church cannot be driven to revise its understanding of homosexuality by the pressure of modern political correctness. "We respond to the argument that we have got to 'move with the times' by saying that as Christian disciples we are called to obey the teaching of Scripture whether we like it or not. People may wish it said something different, but we are not at liberty to pick and chose the bits that fit with our current culture of our personal desires."

Responding to Giddings, Reverend Gareth Williams, Vice Pincipal of St. Michael's Theological College in Llandaff, argued: "As regards the Bible, the problem I have is that many people who take the view that the Bible is against homosexuality are approaching a rich and complex text rather too simplistically. Two thousand years on we know so much more about what makes us human. Reading the Bible with the naivety that pretends to know nothing of what modern human psychology tells us about the givenness of our sexuality only perpetuates injustices towards lesbian and gay people. We know that sexuality is hard-wired into our genes, so what Scripture can then help us with is how we can

best handle our given sexuality in a way that best honors human integrity, honesty and faithfulness.” Williams is taking the classic liberal revisionist line by arguing that the Scripture has to be corrected by modern psychology. Furthermore he dishonestly asserts that we “know” that sexual orientation is genetically based, when we actually know no such thing at all.

The stage is now set for a division in the church—and the fuse will be lit if the American church goes ahead with its plans to consecrate Gene Robinson on November 2nd. This action, which most observers still expect to go forward, will put orthodox Anglicans around the world on notice that the unity of their Communion has effectively been destroyed by this unbiblical action.

As expected, several Anglican leaders from Africa were among the champions of orthodoxy at the London meeting. In response to the action of the Episcopal Church, the church of Nigeria had declared: “We totally rejected and renounced this obnoxious attitude and behaviour. It is devilish and satanic. It comes directly from the pit of hell. It is an idea sponsored by Satan himself and being executed by his followers and adherents who have infiltrated the church. The blood and power of Jesus Christ of Nazareth will flush them out with disgrace and great pains.” Any doubt where this church stands?

That is the quality of conviction that this crisis demands. The statement released in London is far too equivocal and temporizing. No doubt, the Anglican Communion will undergo great pains as it deals with this crisis. The clock is ticking as this church runs out of time to recover biblical truth.

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