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Furor Over the Gay Bishop: The Controversy Expands

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An academically trained theologian, the archbishop shows a strong preference for collegial debate. Anglicans go for temperate and reasonable debates and then retire for a glass of sherry. [Southern Baptists, I can assure you, prefer debates with louder volume and then call for carbohydrates.] The archbishop desperately wants to be collegial rather than confrontational—an approach with significant limitations. Speaking before he assumed office, the archbishop described himself as “reasonably good at mediating between groups of people,” but admitted, “Sometimes I give the impression that I’m promising more than I can deliver.” That’s going to be a big problem.

Archbishop Williams has called an extraordinary meeting of Anglican leaders from around the world to discuss the “consequences” of the Episcopal Church’s election of an openly homosexual bishop and its subsequent decision to allow a ‘local option’ on blessing homosexual unions. “I hope that in our deliberations we will find there are ways forward in this situation which can preserve our respect for one another and the bonds that unite us,” he said. [see article in The Guardian, UK] The primates of the Anglican communion are to meet in October, and the debate at the Episcopal Church’s convention is likely to look tame by comparison.

Several African bishops have promised to break ties with any church that sanctions homosexual behavior. At least twenty American bishops have called for a separate Anglican province and threaten to break with the Episcopal Church.

Archbishop Benjamin Nzimbi of Kenya issued a statement with all 29 of his bishops that puts the issue squarely: “Any Anglican diocese that resolves and sanctions same-sex marriages has, as a result kicked itself out of the Anglican communion.” [see New York Times coverage] The Africans have shown real courage in confronting the Western churches’ accommodations to sexual immorality. They were the voices of biblical morality at the 1998 Lambeth Conference, staring down liberal revisionists like John Shelby Spong, the retired bishop of Newark, NJ. Having shown courage in the face of death squads, these bishops are unintimidated by American heretics and their condescending attitudes. [Spong explained that the African bishops opposed homosexuality because their culture was so recently pagan. The Africans turned the table by suggesting that Spong was the one promoting a pagan morality.]

The Anglican communion is committed to an ideal of ‘comprehensiveness,’ by which it intentionally includes liberals and evangelicals, low and high churchers, and an almost limitless range of theological positions. Almost limitless, that is.

Comprehensiveness has its limitations after all—and sexual morality is the limit. As one figure at the last Lambeth Conference explained, when it gets down to sexual morality, even the laypeople understand. Yes, and they generally have

more sense.

The two opposing sides in this argument cannot be at peace unless one side declares a unilateral surrender. This issue cannot be mediated by compromise. Homosexuality will be considered fully acceptable or not. Homosexuals will be ordained or not. The church will bless homosexual unions, or not. The middle ground does not exist.

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