

My Letter to Bishop Smith: Drew and Me, Part 1

I do not pretend to have a gift of prophecy. In fact, I often get things quite wrong. However, the response of the House of Bishops today to the Tanzania Communique immediately brought back to me the words I wrote to Bishop Andrew Smith almost four years ago now, which now seem amazingly prescient. Of course, I could not have known when I wrote this letter that only two years later Bishop Smith and an entourage would invade our parish of St. John's, Bristol, change the locks on our building, hack into the confidential files on the parish computer, impose a priest-in-charge who was a leading officer in Affirming Catholicism and who would then fire those of us who were the legally elected vestry, and, finally, that Smith would depose our rector, the Rev. Dr. Mark Hansen from the priesthood of the Episcopal Church. And I certainly could not have foreseen that I would be one of several dozen who would sign a presentment against our bishop that would be completely ignored, while Bishop Smith, still under charges, would be assigned as a judge in the trial of Bishop Cox for crossing diocesan boundaries. The ironies of my letter are rich, it seems.

Pay special attention to what I wrote about the oath of obedience. In the last several years it has become quite clear how TEC interprets that oath. And note what the HOB said today about the "sufficiency of Scripture."

September 7, 2003

The Right Reverend Andrew D. Smith, Bishop
The Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut
1335 Asylum Avenue
Hartford, CT 06105-2295

Dear Bishop Smith:

It is with deep regret that I write to inform you that I am withdrawing my request to be considered for ordination to the priesthood in the Episcopal diocese of Connecticut.

I want to thank you for the courtesy extended to me on my visit to Diocesan House on June 10, and for your willingness to allow me to continue with the discernment process.

Unfortunately, in light of the recent events of this summer's General Convention, I can not in good conscience continue with the ordination process, at least not in the diocese of Connecticut.

Please let me explain why I believe this to be so.

When we met, we discussed the possibility that the Anglican Communion might split as a result of actions taken by General Convention, and I had stated my concerns that the issues dividing Episcopalians needed to be considered theologically rather than simply on political or personal grounds. The 1998 Lambeth Conference, the Anglican primates, the two most recent Archbishops of Canterbury, and two theological commissions (one formed by Archbishop Carey and one formed specifically to advise General Convention) have stressed repeatedly that it is inappropriate either to bless same sex relationships or to ordain those involved in same sex relations because there is not enough theological consensus in the Anglican Communion to do so.

Despite these warnings, General Convention voted to confirm the ordination of Gene Robinson as a bishop, and to sanction local option to bless same sex relations, but it did so on political and personal grounds rather than first having decided on theological grounds whether same sex relations are actually permissible. Indeed, the Convention admitted that the Episcopal Church had not yet reached theological agreement on this issue, as evidenced by its own theological study commission, and so the Convention made the decisions it made

without theological warrant.

Regardless of its lack of theological foundation, General Convention has *de facto* changed the “doctrine, discipline, and worship” of the Episcopal Church by this action. This change of doctrine now makes it impossible for me to participate in the service for the “Ordination of a Priest” in an honest manner, and with a clear conscience. At one point or another, I would have to lie.

The candidate for ordination is asked to affirm three things: (1) To “solemnly declare” to “believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation.” (2) To “be loyal to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church.” (3) To “obey your bishop and other ministers who may have authority over you and your work.”

Despite the concerted efforts of scholars like William Countryman and John Boswell to argue that Scripture does not prohibit committed long-term same sex relations, but rather prohibits *different kinds* of same sex relations, the scholarly consensus has not changed that the plain sense reading of Scripture prohibits *all* sexual relationships outside of monogamous heterosexual marriage. (See the attached.) Given the radical innovation in Church teaching that General Convention approved, there would need to be an overwhelming corresponding change in the consensus of biblical scholarship before proceeding to endorse same sex relationships, but the opposite has occurred instead. Biblical scholarship has roundly rejected rather than endorsed the revised interpretation as an accurate reading of Scripture.

Accordingly, the doctrinal change made at General Convention places the candidate for ordination in an impossible dilemma. If he or she affirms that the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God and contain all things necessary for salvation, then the candidate cannot in good conscience swear to be loyal to the

doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church, since the Episcopal Church's new doctrine about sexuality conflicts with the plain teaching of Scripture. If the candidate honestly swears to be loyal to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church, then the candidate cannot honestly swear to believe what he or she is required to believe about the Scriptures.

Finally, a new dilemma arises when the candidate is asked to swear obedience to the bishop. A bishop represents not simply his or her own authority in a geographical diocese, but the entire catholic Church in continuity with the faith delivered once and for all, and maintained through historical succession from the apostles. But now that the official teaching of the Episcopal Church is no longer in agreement with the catholic doctrine of the Church about sexuality, or with the affirmed teaching of the Anglican Communion, the question arises as to whom or what the candidate is now swearing obedience. Is the candidate swearing obedience to the bishop merely as an individual? What then becomes of the affirmation that the bishop is representative of the tradition and authority of the entire catholic Church as a member of the universal episcopate? Is the candidate swearing obedience to the bishop as a representative of the Episcopal church as a denomination, and to its new teaching on sexuality, to the exclusion of the consensus of the rest of the Anglican Communion and worldwide Christendom? Then the candidate would be swearing obedience to the bishop as representative of a national Protestant sect, and not as part of the catholic Body of Christ, and would in effect be renouncing membership in the Anglican Communion. Is the candidate swearing obedience to the bishop as a representative of the Body of Christ as manifested in the worldwide Anglican Communion? But the vast majority of the bishops of the Anglican Communion are at odds with the Episcopal Church's new teaching on sexuality, and the candidate would have to decide between loyalty to the bishops of the Anglican Communion, and loyalty to the local bishop.

At this point, I am reminded of the biblical admonition to "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No' (James 5:12; cf. Mt. 5:37.) I believe that the promises made at ordination are solemn vows, and are not to be undertaken lightly. They are not to be made with duplicity, reservations, or while crossing one's fingers behind one's back. Rather, being ordained is a time for straight speaking, and complete honesty before God, the Church, and one's bishop. Because I could not in honesty simultaneously affirm that the Bible is the Word of God, and swear to uphold the new doctrine of the Episcopal Church on sexuality, I cannot in good conscience consent to be ordained in the diocese of Connecticut. At the same time, I would prefer not to have to choose between loyalty to my bishop and the Episcopal Church, and loyalty to the Anglican Communion, but if forced to do so, I would have to be loyal to the worldwide Anglican Communion, not to a national denomination or a local diocese.

I want to be clear that this is my own decision. I am speaking only for myself, and not for St. John's Episcopal Church, Bristol, or my rector, the Rev. Dr. Mark Hansen. I am not claiming to be morally superior to the bishops and deputies at General Convention who have changed the doctrine of the Episcopal Church. I am a sinner, justified (I pray) by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and his atoning death and resurrection, with skeletons in my own closet. I *am* affirming that General Convention has acted improperly, without theological warrant, and without consideration of its place in the broader Anglican communion that claims to be a body of catholic Christianity. I have not made this decision lightly, nor out of simple animosity or disappointment that "my side lost" at General Convention. As I made clear in our conversation on June 10, and in the discernment materials I submitted to the diocese, I believe that I have a genuine vocation to ordained ministry, a call that has relentlessly pursued me since childhood. I am giving up this call with great reluctance, at least for now, and at least in the

Episcopal diocese of Connecticut. I am grieved.

I would ask that you would remember me in your prayers, as I will remember you in mine. It is my hope that when the Anglican primates meet this fall, they will be able to find a way for the Anglican Communion to remain united, and to be faithful to the Scriptures, and to catholic tradition. I would hope that we would both pray for the future of the Anglican Communion, and that it will remain faithful to God's will as revealed in the Scriptures, and be preserved in catholic unity, but if it cannot remain united, that it would at least remain faithful.

With All Due Respect,

William G. Witt, Ph.D.

Representative Contemporary Biblical Scholarship on Same Sex Relations

Note that the scholars cited below do not necessarily agree with the Bible's teaching. Some reject it, or suggest it be modified. Nor are they universally "conservative" in their theological stances. They represent the contemporary consensus of scholarship (both liberal and conservative, from a variety of confessional traditions) about *what the Bible actually teaches* on same sex relations. They make it clear that the exegetical interpretations of scholars like William Countryman and John Boswell are eccentric.

Roman Catholic

"I believe the general outlines of biblical teaching on sex are fairly clear. . . . [T]he *general* parameters of a "biblical" sexual morality are not in great dispute (setting gender aside for the moment). Sex, in both the Hebrew and the early Christian scriptures, is assumed to belong in heterosexual marriage, which is faithful and procreative. . . . [T]here is scarcely any doubt that premarital sex, adultery,

divorce, prostitution, and homosexuality are not included in the ideal." Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Sexual Ethics: A Feminist Biblical Perspective," *Interpretation* (Jan 95) 49(1): 6.

Jewish

"The Bible's extreme aversion to homosexuality is part of [the] concern not to let sexual activity destroy the categories of orderly existence. . . . Homosexual activity, as known in the ancient world, exists outside the pair-bond structure, which is the social locus of permissible sexuality. Furthermore, it blurs the distinction between male and female, and this cannot be tolerated in the biblical system. Anything that smacks of homosexual blurring is similarly prohibited, such as cross-dressing. . . . Forbidden sexuality, like adultery, incest, homosexuality, and bestiality . . . becomes a national concern. Such sexual behavior is a threat to social order, as is murder, and again, like murder, it is said to pollute the land and thereby endanger the very survival of Israel. Leviticus 18 relates that the pre-Israel inhabitants of the land indulged in the incestuous relations listed there, in bestiality, homosexuality, and molech-worship, and that-as a result-the land became defiled and vomited out its inhabitants. . . . Israel's right of occupation is contingent upon its care not to do these things, for murder, illicit sex and idolatry will pollute the land, and a polluted land will not sustain them." Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (Ballantine Books, 1992), 195-196.

Presbyterian

"The holiness of God's people is integrally tied to the sanctity of the institution of marriage, which was assumed by the Old Testament to be both divinely ordained and normative. . . . Homosexuality was universally condemned and dismissed as abhorrent." Brevard Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Fortress, 1985), 79.

Methodist

“Paul was against homosexuality, both active and inactive, both male and female. This marks him as Jewish. . . Jews, looking at the Gentile world, saw it as full of *porneia*, sexual sin of all sorts, and homosexuality was a prime case. They condemned it, lock, stock, and barrel. This is emphasized in the Bible . . . and repeated in subsequent Jewish literature. . . . So when we turn to Paul, we are not surprised that he condemns all homosexual activity, nor that he specifies both the active and the passive partners. . . . Some scholars propose that the words are uncertain as to meaning and thus that perhaps Paul did not really condemn homosexuality. The words, however, are quite clear. . . . Paul condemns both male and female homosexuality in blanket terms and without making any distinction.” E. B. Sanders, *Paul* (Oxford, 1991), 110, 112-113.

“The few biblical texts that *do* address the topic of homosexual behavior . . . are unambiguously and unremittingly negative in their judgment. . . Paul’s use of the term [*arsenokoitai*] presupposes and reaffirms the holiness code’s condemnation of homosexual acts. This is not a controversial point in Paul’s argument. . . . Paul simply assumes that his readers will share his conviction that those who indulge in homosexual activity are ‘wrongdoers’ . . . Paul’s choice of homosexuality as an illustration of human depravity is not merely random: it serves his rhetorical purposes by providing a vivid image of humanity’s primal rejection of the sovereignty of God the Creator. . . . Though only a few biblical texts speak of homoerotic activity, all that do mention it express unqualified disapproval. Thus, on this issue, there is no synthetic problem for New Testament ethics. In this respect, the issue of homosexuality differs significantly from such matters as slavery or the subordination of women, concerning which the Bible contains internal tensions and counterposed witnesses. The biblical

witness against homosexual practices is univocal.” Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (HarperCollins, 1996), 381, 382-383, 385, 389.

Anglican

“For all the issues that divided the church in the past . . . tolerance or blessing of homosexual acts was never one of them. Apparently scripture’s plain sense was simply too plain when it came to homosexual behavior. The history of interpretation, Jewish and Christian, bears witness to the ‘plainness’ of scripture on this matter.” Christopher Seitz, “Sexuality and Scripture’s Plain Sense,” *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Eerdmans, 1998), 324-325.