

Why I signed “Dear Gay Anglicans”

I have hesitated to say anything public about the current discussion concerning the ACNA College of Bishops Statement on “Sexuality and Identity,” which has become acrimonious very quickly. However, in recent days I have become more concerned as cases of “false witness” have begun to appear in regard to those who signed the “Dear Gay Anglicans” response. To say nothing might seem to confirm the truth of the suspicions.

Before addressing the ACNA College of Bishops Statement on “Sexuality and Identity: A Pastoral Statement from the College of Bishops,” it is important to be clear that my position on sexuality and sexual ethics has not changed. I first came to teach at Trinity School for Ministry two years after my entire church was taken over by my bishop because of our challenging the bishop over the ordination of Gene Robinson, who became the first sexually-active gay bishop in the Episcopal Church. I often point out that I did not leave the Episcopal Church. I was kicked out.

On my blog I posted an essay in 2012 on “The Hermeneutics of Same-Sex Practice: A Summary and Evaluation.” I still stand by every word I wrote in that essay.

I teach the introductory course in Christian Ethics at TSM, and in that course I affirm and teach the church’s historic position on sexuality. TSM has a doctrinal statement which every faculty member has to affirm every two years, and I affirm it without hesitation.

I first began reading the ACNA College of Bishops Statement “Sexuality and Identity: A Pastoral Statement from the College of Bishops” with a certain amount of hope. The “Preamble” of the Document outlines a biblical theology of sexuality with

which I am in fundamental agreement. I would want to add to the one-sentence statement that “God established marriage between male and female to fill the earth through procreation (Genesis 1:28).” The crucial theological account of the purpose of marriage occurs not in Genesis 1 but in Genesis 2 where it becomes clear that “man” and “woman” are created as complementary *opposites* whose primary purpose is to provide companionship for one another. Certainly the document is correct in its overall summary of the biblical account of marriage – that God intends marriage as a lifelong exclusive commitment between one man and one woman, that a key (not the exclusive) purpose of marriage is raising and caring for children, and that marriage between man and woman is parallel to the union between Christ and the Church. I am a member of ACNA (among other reasons) because it affirms the historical biblical, catholic, and evangelical understanding of marriage.

The document also correctly affirms that human sinfulness is universal and is manifested in a variety of ways, including sexual brokenness and temptation. Among personal friends and family members, I would say that adultery (inevitably accompanied by divorce) is one of the worst offenders – continuing to create ongoing trauma and pain even for the grown children of those who have had to live through it in their families. A quite serious related area of sexual sin not mentioned in the document would be that of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse within a marriage, and sexual harassment or abuse by those in positions of authority in work places, social organizations, and, even in the church. Certainly ACNA as well as other churches and church related organizations have begun to take steps to recognize and address these issues in recent years. The point here is that sexual sin is not limited to those who experience same-sex attraction, and heterosexuals need to recognize and acknowledge our own sexual brokenness if we hope to be heard when we address concerns related to same-sex orientation.

I especially appreciate that the document correctly acknowledges that there are Christians who experience same-sex attraction, and who intend to lead lives of Christian chastity, while also acknowledging that only a minority of such people change their orientation. A very important acknowledgment is that "conversion therapy" is unhelpful and indeed "distressing" and "traumatizing." Throughout much of the 1990s, many traditional Christians placed their hopes in "conversion therapy" as a catchall solution to the problem of homosexuality, a solution based more on dubious principles of Freudian psychology than on either biblical or historically Christian understandings of spiritual formation. The failures of "conversion therapy" in recent years, including public exposure of abusive and bizarre "therapies," has tended to discredit those in the churches who uncritically supported it. That it abused and traumatized so many should be a cause for repentance.

The first part of the document concludes by acknowledging that there are members of ACNA who experience same-sex attraction, who want to be faithful to a biblical ethic, who find themselves not belonging in "progressive" denominations, but who feel "alienated" by fellow orthodox Christians. The bishops acknowledge that there are those within ACNA who are "Christians with same-sex attraction," who "experience same-sex attraction," that some of these (an acknowledged minority) may experience a change of sexual orientation, that others will experience only a "change of will," while others will face an "ongoing struggle" along with a hope for the resurrection. All three are told that they are "fighting the good fight to become more like Jesus," and are advised: "Please hear this: we love you, respect you, and pray that this statement will encourage you." The document concludes with a single paragraph calling for "care and sensitivity" for those struggling with same-sex attraction.

I want to be absolutely clear that I am in fundamental

agreement with this first half of the COB document. Why then wouldn't orthodox Christians within ACNA, whether "experiencing same-sex attraction" or not, be encouraged by this document? I confess that I was disappointed at the material that followed. This should have been the point for some discussion of what such pastoral care and sensitivity would look like. Instead, the document shifts to a fourteen-paragraph discussion about the term "gay Christian" and why this term should not be used because it causes "confusion."

My single issue of concern with the COB letter is a pastoral one and has to do with terminology. There are a group of Christians who (in the language of the COB letter) "experience same-sex attraction" and who are striving to live lives of holiness faithfully to the gospel. This means either that they are celibate or that (some of them) will enter into marriages with opposite-sex partners where they will still have to deal with temptation – as do those of us who are heterosexual. The church should affirm them in this – as does the COB letter.

However, the conclusion of the COB letter deals with the issue of a single adjective: how should we refer to such people? The COB letter says that we should not use the adjective "gay," but instead use the term "Christians who experience same-sex attraction." The letter also claims that the use of the expression "gay Christian" means that these people are claiming that their identity is in their sexual orientation, not in Christ.

I found the first observation unhelpful and a quarrel about terminology. Oliver O'Donovan, perhaps the Anglican Communion's foremost ethicist, wrote a book as long ago as 2008 entitled *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion*. O'Donovan affirms the church's historic position throughout the book, but he does not hesitate to use the adjective "gay" to describe those with same-sex orientation. He has a chapter entitled "Good News for the Gay Christian?" in which he affirms that the church's historic

position is indeed good news for “gay Christians.” Richard Hays in his textbook *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* written in 1996, which I use in my Christian Ethics course, and which certainly affirms the traditional position, uses both the adjectives “homosexual” and “gay” throughout the book to describe people with “same sex attraction.” So the adjective “gay” in reference to celibate Christians who “experience same-sex attraction” has been around for awhile, decades really. It has only become controversial recently.

The second observation is that the statement about identity is simply not correct. “Gay” celibate Christians use the term as an adjective, not as an identity. The position is no different from the policy of Alcoholics Anonymous. Every member of AA stands at the beginning of their meetings and pronounces “I am so and so, and I am an alcoholic.” This is not to affirm that “alcoholic” is their “identity.” It does acknowledge that unless one recognizes one’s temptations, one cannot deal with them. Groups of celibate “gay Christians” are trying to do the same thing – provide support for one another against temptation, and a major part of this is acknowledging who they are and the temptations with which they struggle. (If I find time, I may write something more about this issue of “identity.”)

TSM actually held a conference about this way back in 2015. Videos are still available on Youtube. And of course we have had one such celibate gay Christian on the faculty at TSM for years – Wes Hill.

Finally, I have a concern about mission. Only in the last decade have conservative Christians begun ministering to people in the “gay” community. Many of these people are either attracted to orthodox Christianity or grew up in traditional churches. They are struggling to lead faithful Christian lives, either as celibates or in heterosexual marriages. They are not interested in theologically liberal denominations, but they are often wary of conservative churches where they fear

rejection – often rightly so. In the last few days, I received the following email from an ACNA priest, who is ministering in a community with a large “gay” population. Whatever may have been the intention of the COB letter, it was heard as saying to these people: “You are not welcome in our church.”

Hello Dr. Witt,

Between you and me, my church is in a community that is probably over 20% gay. In light of recent events members of my church have decided they are not safe/welcome in the Anglican communion. Is there a place I could point them so they do not end up out of church altogether? They are too conservative for ECUSA.

Again, I know this priest, and I know something of his history in ministry. He is certainly upholding and teaching the biblical and historic position on sexuality.

I also received the following recently:

I have a small church plant near _____ and we have a strong relationship with many in the LGBTQ community here. This will be very harmful to our mission. I have a candidate for ministry who is SSA who is devastated.

I am certain that was not the intention, but the COB statement has made the ministry of these two priests more difficult.

For a helpful discussion of how the orthodox church can minister to the “gay” community as well as what we can learn from celibate “gay” Christians, I would recommend Mark Yarhouse’s book *Costly Obedience: What We Can Learn from the Celibate Gay Christian Community*.

Finally, I would point to two essays that helpfully address my concerns about the COB letter:

Gay Christians, ACNA and GAFCON

Reflections on The ACNA Pastoral Statement

My position is the same as it has been for at least twenty-five years, and it has not changed. I left the Episcopal Church when they departed from biblical sexual morality. (Again, I was kicked out.) At the same time, it is important that the church welcome repentant sinners – all sinners. If we affirm that Jesus Christ died for people who “experience same-sex attraction,” then we need to be clear that we will affirm and support them as they attempt to lead faithful Christian lives, and we should not get distracted from this by disagreements about an adjective. The whole point of the letter I signed was to affirm that.

I ask for your prayers for our church. And if you disagree with me, pray for me that my eyes might be opened. I especially ask your prayer for mutual forbearance and charity for everyone involved in this discussion.