

It's about communion! But communion with whom??

Over at Church of the Holy Communion in Charleston, South Carolina, [Fr. Dow Sanderson](#) speaks about his decision to remain in the Episcopal Church:

I especially urge those of you who feel that you must leave your church home, in these difficult times, and seek another Anglican "safe haven". Like so many things in this broken and highly polarized world, some would frame this discussion as simply a choice between Biblical, Orthodox Truth on the one hand, and very progressive, liberals on the other. This simply is not true. In fact, the overwhelming majority of Anglo-Catholics in the United States remain a part of the Episcopal Church and have absolutely no intention of doing otherwise. These would include, of course, very famous places like St. Paul's in Washington, Church of the Advent in Boston, St. Thomas, Fifth Avenue in New York, St. John's in Savannah, to name just a few.

What is at stake here is Communion. Anglicanism, in all its expressions, has always claimed to be something more than just a church of the Reformation. Reformed, yes, but through our ties to the ancient See of Canterbury, we have depth of Tradition and continuity with the Apostolic Church that has always been highly valued.

I certainly think that people of good conscience can remain in The Episcopal Church. At the same time, Fr. Sanderson begs a number of questions. Foremost, he states that the question is one of "communion." But this begs the question, "communion with whom?" The Catholic tradition is quite clear that communion is only possible with those who hold the Catholic faith. One of the better books on this subject is Werner

Elert's *Eucharist and Communion in the First Four Centuries* (Concordia Publishing House, 2003). St. Athanasius was not in communion with the heretic Arius. St. Cyril of Alexandria was not in communion with Nestorius. St. Augustine was not in communion with the Donatists. After the ecumenical councils of the early centuries, those who refused to subscribe to them were no longer in communion with the Catholic Church. For example, the Copts refused to recognize Chalcedon, and have been out of communion with the Orthodox churches to this day. Rome and Orthodoxy do not agree on the role of the pope, and so they have been out of communion since 1054. And, of course, Anglicans have been out of communion with Rome since Henry VIII.

The second question that Fr. Sanderson fails to address has to do with canon law and the role of the bishop in a diocese. As a priest in a diocese, what is one's obligation when one's bishop is deposed for "abandoning the communion" when he has not in fact done so? Bishop Mark Lawrence did not leave the Episcopal Church. He was kicked out. He was kicked out based on the misuse of a canon that was intended to be used for clergy that really had left the Episcopal Church and joined another denomination. But Bishop Mark was actually trying to keep the Diocese of South Carolina in TEC, not leave. In a case of double jeopardy, Bishop Lawrence was re-tried (without a trial or representation) on charges that had already been dismissed a year ago. Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori stated that she had accepted ["the renunciation of the ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church of Mark Lawrence,"](#) although TEC's canons state that such renunciation must be received in writing, and [Bishop Lawrence has denied that he made such a renunciation.](#)

So the Presiding Bishop's claim that Bishop Mark had "abandoned the communion," was, at the least, a very creative interpretation of TEC's canon law. To be blunt, Bishop Mark did not abandon communion. TEC broke communion by deposing

him. It was only after TEC violated its own canon law by deposing Bishop Mark that South Carolina left TEC. Moreover, the Global South bishops (who represent the majority of bishops in the Anglican Communion) have [refused to recognize the deposition of Bishop Lawrence](#), and they continue to recognize Bishop Lawrence as the legitimate bishop of South Carolina: "We want to assure you that we recognize your Episcopal orders and your legitimate Episcopal oversight of the Diocese of South Carolina within the Anglican Communion." So the question of "communion" is not a straightforward one.

Given that Bishop Mark's deposition was contrary to TEC's own canons, it would seem that Bishop Mark still the legitimate bishop of the Diocese of South Carolina, and, as a priest in that diocese, Sanderson either acknowledges the legitimacy of TEC's deposition, or not. By placing himself under TEC's authority in South Carolina, Fr. Sanderson is making a choice. He is choosing to be in communion with TEC. But he is also choosing to refuse to be in communion with Bishop Lawrence, who, until TEC wrongfully deposed him, was Fr. Sanderson's bishop.

When I lived in Boston, I attended Church of the Advent, which Fr. Sanderson mentions, for a year or so. Fr. Sanderson finds it significant that the Church of the Advent remains in TEC. However, I know something of that story. During the time I lived in Boston, Advent survived a near schism when the unique governing board at Advent (a "corporation," not an elected vestry) attempted to leave TEC (not over doctrine) and take the building with them. But the majority of the congregation did not agree with the corporation, and the matter went to court. The congregation won. The corporation lost. But that set a legal precedent. The building belonged not to the corporation, but to the diocese. The current congregation at Advent has not left, and could not leave, because they would lose their building to the diocese.

When I attended Advent, the average Sunday attendance (ASA)

was around 400. [TEC's statistics page indicates that it is now around 250](#). So the Church of the Advent has not left TEC. But somewhere around a third of its Sunday attendees have. When I attended, Advent had two kinds of members, those who were serious Anglo-Catholics, and those who attended because they liked the beautiful music and liturgy. I cannot be certain, but I would imagine that the vast majority of those who no longer attend Advent on Sunday mornings were the serious Anglo-Catholics. Those ones who still keep coming are likely those who come for the music.

So what's my point? My point is not to criticize Fr. Sanderson for his decision to remain in the Episcopal Church. For those of us who are committed to orthodox Anglicanism, and have struggled with the Episcopal Church crisis over the last decade or more, where we end up is never simple. People can stay, and they can leave, and both decisions can be made in good conscience.

At the same time, Communion is important. But communion is also a choice, and a necessary choice that we all must make. To choose to be in communion with some is by necessity to choose not to be in communion with others. If one stays in the Episcopal Church, one has not chosen "communion" over non-communion. One has chosen communion with some (such as Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori) over others (such as Bishop Mark Lawrence). Unfortunately, it is impossible to choose both, and I would suggest that it is the Episcopal Church that has forced that decision on the orthodox, not the reverse.

I get mail . . .

I received the following today, which succinctly summarizes questions I have been asked numerous times in recent years:

Dear Sir,

Just curious about how you can be a part of ACNA which endorses and embraces innovations to doctrine and discipline that seem to make the Assumption and IC rather more forgivable- i.e. ordination of women, theology of the 1979 BCP, etc. Thanks for your website.

Sincerely, Fr. _____

My response follows:

Fr. _____,

Your question is too short to answer without knowing what specific objections you have in mind, and on what basis you object.

I am enough of an Anglican to follow Richard Hooker in his distinction between matters of doctrine and morals (which are unchangeable) and matters of church practice and polity (which, under certain circumstances can be).

So the 1979 BCP is a matter of church practice and polity, a fallible human document, as was the 1549 BCP, the 1552 BCP, the 1559 BCP, the 1662 BCP, the American 1928 BCP, the Roman Catholic Tridentine rite and the Novus Ordo. Cranmer's Prayer Book captured well the Reformed Catholic theology of the English Reformation, but, as a document of its time, it shared many of the problematic assumptions of late Medieval spirituality and theology that were common then. The 1979 BCP, whatever its weaknesses, was largely a product of the liturgical renewal movement of the mid-twentieth century, which, as a movement of its time, also shared in many of the

problematic assumptions of the mid-twentieth century. Nonetheless, the liturgical renewal movement also got a lot of things right, and the 1979 BCP, while not infallible, was, in some definite ways, an improvement on Cranmer.

The ACNA does not, however, regard the 1979 BCP as without problems. I am a consultant to the Liturgical Taskforce of the ACNA, and the Committee is now working on what will be a long term project of producing a new Prayer Book. The Committee has already produced a new Ordinal, which corrects what we regard as some of the defects of the 1979 Ordinal, and it is now being used exclusively for ordinations in the ACNA. The Committee's current task is to produce a new baptismal rite, which will, in time, replace the 1979 rite. However, this is going to be a lengthy and piecemeal process. Until the new Prayer Book is produced, congregations are free to use any of the traditional Prayer Books (including the 1979), recognizing that none of them are infallible, but something is better than nothing, and it is impossible to produce a new Prayer Book out of thin air. Neither will the ACNA's new Prayer Book be without fault.

In addition, I am also a recent member of the Catechetical Task Force, whose goal is to produce a Catechesis that will be creedal, rooted in Scripture, and draw on the history of catechetical practice and earlier catechisms (not only Protestant, but also the current Roman Catholic Catechism) as well as recent catechetical scholarship. We believed that a more robust catechetical formation will do much to creating Christian disciples, as opposed to mere pew sitters.

The question of Women's Ordination is a different, although related question. I do not have time to address it in a short reply, but I would say that WO is far from the clear cut black and white issue that its opponents make it out to be. It is entirely a different matter from such issues as homosexual practice (which is clearly and univocally condemned)

throughout the Bible, or central creedal dogmas (the Trinity, the incarnation, the bodily resurrection of Christ) that are necessary implications of the plain reading of Scripture. The question of WO is, then, a question of whether or not this practice (like the practice of creating a liturgy in English) falls within the freedom of the church, or whether there is something inherent to the ontology of ordination that makes the ordination of women impossible. That is a theological question, and not one that can be addressed simply by pointing to previous practice.

As for the Assumption and IC, these are dogmas (not matters of church polity and practice). They have no basis in a plain sense reading of Scripture, nor are they, like the Nicene and Chalcedonian dogmas, necessary implications of what Scripture teaches. Moreover, as historical developments, they are separated from the apostolic period by centuries. As such, it is implausible to argue that they are the products of an unbroken unwritten tradition.

Finally, I believe that the church has been given the task of guarding the Apostolic Deposit of Faith. At the same time, we are successors to the apostles, not apostles. As such, the church is not infallible. This gives a certain freedom. It allows that the church has made mistakes in the past, and will necessarily make mistakes in the future. But it also means that such mistakes are, at least in principle, correctible.

Grace and Peace,

Bill Witt

P.S. By coincidence, I also receive today a copy of an inquiry addressed to the Liturgical Committee by a lay person who was concerned that the new ACNA Prayer Book might be guilty of teaching the heretical Roman Catholic doctrine of baptismal regeneration. To the contrary, I would argue that "baptismal regeneration" is the historic doctrine of Anglicanism. It was

clearly embraced by the Anglican Reformers, and is the teaching of the historic Prayer Books, 1549, 1552, 1559, 1662, and American 1928.

Given Fr. _____ 's apparent affirmation of the Assumption and Immaculate Conception, I would doubt that he would have any objections to baptismal regeneration. Nonetheless, as the contrast between these two inquiries (both arriving on the same day) makes clear, it is impossible to make everyone happy all the time.

Whatever It Is, I'm (Not Necessarily) Against It!

I used to be a regular participant at the two most frequented "conservative" Episcopal/Anglican blogs. I refuse to comment at one at all any more, and do no more than make the occasional comment at the other.

Why? While I consider myself an orthodox Anglican, I do not in any sense of the word consider myself a "conservative." I reject the term "conservative" when applied to orthodox Christianity because, first, it is a meaningless term. "Conservative" only makes sense as an adjective. "Conservative" as to what? What do I think it worthwhile to "conserve"? Furthermore, "conservative" only makes sense in a spectrum from "conservative" to "moderate" to "progressive," a spectrum in which both ends and middle constantly shift. A generation ago, I would have been considered a "moderate" in the Episcopal Church. Without having moved, the same positions I held then, are now considered "conservative" or even "fundamentalist." Finally, "conservative" too often confuses

the realms of politics and religion. To embrace any political ideology, whether it calls itself “conservative” or “progressive” is a betrayal of the gospel. If Jesus Christ is Lord, he stands in judgment on all political positions.

However, “conservative” can also mean “reactionary,” and this is more and more what the term means on the two most widely read “conservative” Episcopal/Anglican blogs. A “reactionary” is someone whose position can be summarized in the lines from Groucho Marx’s song from the movie *Horsefeathers*:

“I don’t know what they have to say
It makes no difference anyway;
Whatever it is, I’m against it!”

More and more frequently in the last year or two, discussions on these two blogs have become a constant repetition of Groucho’s theme. I first began to notice “Groucho-ism” in the comments in response to blog posts in which orthodox Anglicans would be accused of various “politically incorrect” offenses by their opponents. I often found myself preparing to respond to the accusations by protesting that they were stereotypical caricatures, only to discover that I had been beaten to the punch by commenters who had already gotten there first, not only failing to renounce the criticisms as caricatures, but rather enthusiastically embracing the “caricature”: “You think conservative Christians don’t care about the environment? Darn right! Environmentalism is an invention of atheists who love trees more than people! There is no such thing as global warming, and I drive the biggest gas-guzzling SUV I can afford!”

I then began to notice that even before looking at comments, I could predict the direction in which discussion would flow. Predictably, if the posts were about any political or theological position that was even slightly to the left of the extreme far right of the political or theological spectrum, the Groucho refrain would kick in, “Whatever it is, I’m

against it!"

The end really began for me with last year's political election in which I could predict that any discussion having anything to do with Barak Obama would produce myriad posts of unthinking vitriol in which Obama would be accused of every imaginable evil. I had hopes that once the election was over, conversation might return to a more thoughtful tone. Instead, both blog sites have become "all Obama, all the time." Even in discussions that have nothing to do with politics, Obama's name will frequently appear. Any time someone writes or says something with which commenters disagree, this shows that the offending party is just like Obama.

At one of the sites today, there was a post indicating that Reinhold Niebuhr is President Obama's favorite theologian. The responses were predictable. Anyone liked by Obama had to be bad, and immediately Niebuhr was attacked as a "relativist," and a "socialist." While Niebuhr does not stand in my top list of theological influences, he was one of the most important theologians and political thinkers of the twentieth century. I noted that "Amidst the superficial partisan soundbites that have passed for political discourse in this country for the last three decades or more, a little dose of Niebuhr would be a helpful tonic." And, of course, the original commenter responded by simply affirming his original sound bite. Or, in the words of Groucho, "Whatever it is, I'm against it."

I have great hopes for the future of orthodox Anglicanism in North America. I work at a seminary with some of the most intelligent and thoughtful orthodox Christian biblical scholars and theologians I have met anywhere. I teach students who have made great sacrifices to pursue ordination for an uncertain future in which many of them will be starting churches in store fronts and gymnasiums. I have gotten to know just a little some of the leaders of this movement, including Archbishop Bob Duncan, and global leaders like Primate Mouneer Anis. I am amazed at how much the people in this community

love one another, and at how they pray and worship together.

If orthodox Anglicans commit ourselves to be transformed by the gospel, including the challenging of our favorite prejudices, God may well bless our efforts. At the same time, there is a dark underbelly to this “conservative” Anglican movement. If we define ourselves as a church in reaction, we deserve to fail. Jesus did not die so we could say, “Whatever it is, I’m against it!”

Addendum: As an experiment, I did a search on the more restrained of the two blogs, ostensibly concerned primarily with Anglican/Episcopal matters.

On TitusOneNine, I found the following number of references in titles, entries, and comments:

Obama 1746

Schori 1258

Rowan 1494

Duncan 774

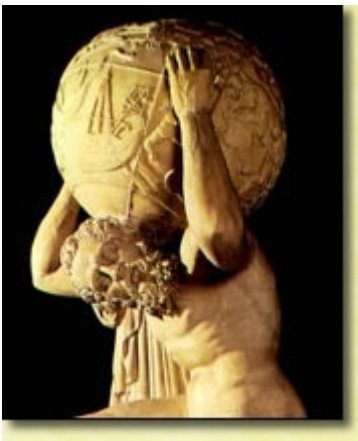
It makes it very difficult to make the case that the disagreement between “conservative” Episcopalians/Anglicans and “progressives” is about theological disagreements rather than politics when President Obama is more of a topic of conversation in articles and comments than either the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Archbishop of Canterbury, or the head of the new Anglican Province in North America.

The Perils of Bootstrapping or What is Christian Ethics? A Sermon

This is the first sermon I preached right after The Episcopal Church's General Convention 2003. At the time, I was an aspirant for Holy Orders in the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut. Within a month I had withdrawn from the ordination process. Two years later, on July 13, 2005, Bishop Andrew Smith invaded St. John's Episcopal Church, changed the locks and deposed Mark Hansen, our priest, and imposed a priest-in-charge, who later removed those of us on the vestry for "numerous offenses" (unspecified).

I now live in the Anglican Diocese of Pittsburgh, and Archbishop Robert Duncan is my bishop. With the inaugural meeting of the new Anglican Church of North America this week, of which I am a member, I thought it appropriate to repost this sermon.

Psalm 147
Eph. 5: 15-20
John 6:53-59



At General Convention 2003, the Episcopal Church made two decisions that have put the Anglican communion in an uproar. They decided to ordain an Episcopal priest who

had divorced his wife, and has been living in an ongoing homosexual relationship with another man, and they decided to allow individual dioceses to provide rites of blessing for homosexual relationships, at the discretion of the local bishop. The issue of controversy in the Episcopal Church today has to do with a disagreement about ethics or morality. So I have decided to talk a little this morning about Christian ethics.

The first thing that I think needs to be said is that it is quite difficult today to think about ethics from a Christian perspective, even for those inside the Church. The reason for this is that there is a competing ethic in our culture that has nothing to do with Christianity, but which we can hardly avoid. This is an ethic that has so permeated our culture that even Christians fall into its ways of thinking. I am going to refer to this as the "do-it-yourself" ethic. "Doing-it-yourself" is the idea that morality is about doing the best you can—pulling yourself up by your boot straps. If you do the best you can, you'll be all right.

This "do-it-yourself" ethic comes in two varieties, a conservative variety and a liberal variety. The conservative variety aims for perfection. The conservative "do-it-yourselfer" does not allow for any failures, and tolerates no half-hearted efforts. Sometimes this view is called moralism or Puritanism. The liberal "do-it-your-selfer" is more tolerant. He realizes that not everybody is perfect, so he thinks that God grades on a curve. As long as you try, you get an A for effort.

A lot of people think that "do-it-yourself" ethics is just what Christianity is all about, that Christianity is kind of like the boy scouts' motto: "Do a good deed daily." If they like the idea of doing good deeds, then these people approve of Christianity, even if they're not Christians themselves. They say things like, "I admire Jesus' moral teaching. I think

he was a great man . . . but I don't go to church or anything. I'm not a fanatic." On the other hand, if they're not so sure about their own stock of good deeds, if they're concerned that they don't measure up, then they won't like Christianity at all. One sometimes hear people complain that Christians are "goody two shoes" or "killjoys" who like to keep other people from having a good time.

And you can hear both sides represented in the public media discussions of what happened at General Convention. The conservatives were horrified. Even if they don't go to church themselves, they think that Christianity is about keeping the rules, and Bishop Gene Robinson is a bad example. He hasn't kept the rules. On the other hands, the liberals were pleased. It is about time that those Puritan Christians got off their high horse, and accepted the changes that are going on in the real world. Of course, these folks don't go to church, and they're not going to start now, not even if the Episcopal Church comes around to their way of thinking. But they are happy to know that they were right all along.

The problem with both of these groups is that they do not understand the Christian gospel, and so they do not understand Christian ethics. Since they don't understand Christian ethics, they can not provide a Christian evaluation of what has happened in the Episcopal Church.

For the last few weeks, the epistle readings in the lectionary have come from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and what Paul has said has largely had to do with issues of Christian behavior. So I think Paul can give us some tools to help us think about Christian ethics. What does it mean it mean for Christians to act and to live in a moral manner?

The heart of the Christian gospel is about two things: forgiveness of sins and transformation of life. We see this earlier in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. He says in chapter 1, "In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the

forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” In chapter 2, Paul says, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.”

The problem with “do-it-yourself” ethics is that it has no room for forgiveness, and it has no room for redemption and transformation. Since the conservative “do-it-your-selfer” insists on perfection, there is no room to be forgiven, or to start over. For the liberal “do-it-yourselfer,” no one needs to be forgiven. We’re just fine the way we are.

But Christian ethics is an ethic for people who realize that they are sinners, and that they need forgiveness. It is also an ethic for people who know they need to change, but realize that they are powerless to change without divine help.

Christian ethics is about becoming a follower of Jesus. But what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? It means that we enter into a new kind of life, a life that would not be possible if there had been no Jesus. Christian living is about our coming to share in the very life of this Jesus who lived, was crucified, and was raised to new life. The Bible talks about this in different ways. Again in Ephesians, Paul says that “God has raised up up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly places.” Later he uses the imagery of a head and its body. Paul says, “speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body . . . when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” In chapter 4 of Ephesians, Paul compares becoming a Christian to putting on a new suit of clothes. Paul says that through Christ, we have “put off [our] old self,” and have put on a “new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” Scholars believe that Paul is using the image of baptism here. When the early Christians were baptized, they took off their old clothing, and were

immersed in a pool to symbolize that they had died to their old life. After they rose from the water, they put on a new white robe, to illustrate that they had been raised to a new life. When we are baptized, we put aside our old life, our old ways of living and thinking, and begin a new kind of life, a life that is lived because the Holy Spirit lives in us, and unites us to the risen Jesus.

In John's gospel, Jesus says: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit; for apart from me you can do nothing" In this morning's gospel reading, John uses the language of the other central New Testament sacrament, the eucharist or the Lord's Supper, to speak of how we come into union with Christ, and so come to share in this new kind of life. Jesus says: "My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in them. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me."

By being united with Christ, we come to share in the life of Christ. Because Jesus Christ is God incarnate, we can come to share in the very life of God, which Jesus has because he is the Word made flesh, the second person of the Trinity become a human being.

That is the heart of Christian ethics, and it has nothing to do with doing the best we can, or doing it by ourselves. Christian ethics is all about being forgiven, and allowing ourselves to be changed and transformed, as we become more and more like Christ.

And because Christian ethics is not about self-improvement, but God-improvement, that is, about God making us all over again, its characteristic attitudes are neither the scolding we find among Puritan "do-it-your-selfers"—"You've just gotta try a little harder!", nor the kind of defensiveness we often

find among compromising “do-it-your-selfers”—“I’m as good as you. Where do you get off telling me what to do?”

The characteristic attitudes of Christian ethics are the attitudes of those who realize that they have gotten what they do not deserve, not those who think they deserve what they’ve got. What are those attitudes? In the chapter in Ephesians from which this morning’s reading comes, Paul mentions two that are certainly among the most important. First, in this morning’s reading, there is gratitude. Paul says we should “give thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Second, at the beginning of the chapter that was last week’s epistle reading, Paul mentions love as characteristic of those who wish to imitate the God who has come near to us in Jesus Christ. “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” You probably recognize that verse, since it is one of the offertory sentences in the Prayer Book, one of the verses of scripture that is read just before the gifts of tithes and offerings, and bread and wine are presented at the Lord’s table for the celebration of the eucharist.

This then is the heart of Christian ethics. Christian living is about being forgiven, and starting over, and living a new kind of life, a life that depends on the very life of the risen Christ. In Jesus Christ, God become human, died for our sins, and was raised from the dead. Through the Holy Spirit, we are made one with the risen Christ, who shares his life with us, and enables us to live a life of holiness like the life he lived on earth. The Christian life has to do with following Christ, with responding to God’s gift in Christ with gratitude and with love. It is not about just following the rules, nor of saying that I do not have to follow the rules because I am all right just the way I am. Christian ethics is about entering into a new kind of life.

Unfortunately, there is a way of hearing the gospel message so that it is not a message that challenges us to live a new kind of life, but a message that endorses the kind of life we were living anyway. But the gospel message in the New Testament is not that kind of message. If Christian ethics is about sharing in a new life by following Christ, if it means (as Paul says) putting on a new self, then we have to ask, what about that old self? And Paul is very clear, that old self has to die. As Paul says, the old self “belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires.”

Paul begins this morning’s epistle reading with some very negative instructions: “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” In the current climate of disagreement that characterizes discussion in today’s Episcopal Church, there is sometimes a tendency to contrast love and law. Those who want to change the church’s historic teachings claim to be motivated by love, and to be following a new leading of the Holy Spirit. Those who resist the changes are accused of being unloving, and being bound by rules and regulations. I think this contrast is pitifully inadequate. We have heard Paul tell us to “walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us.” But to walk in love means to do certain kinds of things and not to do others. Later in chapter 4, Paul gives a list of instructions that tell us what it means to walk in Christ’s love. He marks a contrast between darkness and light. Paul says, “Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.” Surely Paul’s point is that certain kinds of behaviors are behaviors that are appropriate to the children of light, the behaviors that are good and right and true. And certain kinds of behaviors are not appropriate to the children of light because they are the

works of darkness. To walk in Christ's love is to walk as a child of the light. To walk in darkness is to reject Christ's love.

And throughout Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, Paul contrasts various kinds of behavior which are consistent with Christian love with kinds of behavior that are not. He tells us positively that we should speak the truth in love. Negatively, he tells us that if we become angry, that we should not let the sun go down on our anger. He says the thief should no longer steal, but should do honest work so that he will have something to share with others. Paul says that we should not speak language that will corrupt others, but only things that will build others up, and will give grace to our hearers. He says that we should put aside bitterness and anger and slander, and that instead we should be kind, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as Christ has forgiven us. Lots of negatives there, but each is balanced by a positive.

And, yes, Paul does say some things about sex. He says that those who are sexually immoral have no place in God's kingdom. But Paul is consistent here. What Paul says about sex is not merely negative, for the verse just before Paul condemns sexual immorality is the verse where Paul says that we should walk in love, as Christ loved us. Paul knows that what makes Christian ethics work is that it is about love. All human actions are rooted in desire, but some desires are illusory because they are loves for things that are ultimately not good for us. So Paul says that our old self belongs to a former manner of life that is corrupt through "deceitful desires."

Sexual immorality is one of those loves that ultimately is a false love. It is an attempt to fill a hunger and thirst that can only truly be satisfied by Christ with a substitute. As Jesus says, "My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink." Do-it-yourself religion can offer no hope to the one who is caught in the false love of sexual sin. The high minded Puritan "do-it-yourselfer" can only point fingers, and accuse.

The more open minded “do-it-yourselfer” can only say, “Well, we all do it, don’t we?” But what Paul realizes is that the love of Christ offers hope where “do-it-yourself” religion does not. Christ’s love forgives, and Christ love transforms, and Christ’s love offers the alternative of a holy love for one that is ultimately self-observed. And this offers hope to all of us, for haven’t we all followed deceptive loves from time to time, even if they are not the love that has created the crisis in the Episcopal Church?

Is it too late for the Episcopal Church? I do not know. I do know that speaking the truth in love will not allow the Christian to endorse a false love that separates from Christ even if Episcopal bishops endorse it. But I also know that Christ’s love still offers a way beyond the choice between cold anger and easy acceptance that are the only choices for our contemporary culture. Christ’s love offers forgiveness, and Christ’s love offers transformation. Do we dare to risk that love for ourselves? Can we hear Paul’s words that speak even to us?:

*“Awake, O sleeper
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”*

What About Them Donatists?

The Donatist comparison has been repeated numerous times since the events of General Convention 2003—or, rather, misapplied. Since the move last week by the Common Cause Partners to form a new Anglican Province in North America—a move they made, I might add, in direct response to the request of the majority of Global South Primates at Kigali in 2006—the accusation is

already being dragged out once again. The “breakaway” Anglicans are “Donatists.” They have broken fellowship with those they consider to be sinful. And the Church has repeatedly repudiated this position since the time of Augustine. Sinfulness does not invalidate the sacraments.

Who were the Donatists? The Donatists were a sect in Northern Africa that disagreed with the rest of Catholic Christendom, not primarily over doctrine, but over discipline. They claimed that the sacraments of sinful clergy were invalid. According to Augustine, the primary problem with Donatism was not their theological position so much as that they refused to listen to the rest of the Church. Internationally, they were a small sect within Catholic Christendom, confined to a corner of Northern Africa. However, within Northern Africa, they were the majority.

There is indeed a parallel with the current Anglican situation—but not as it is so often claimed. TEC (like the Donatists) is (within the Church Catholic) a small insignificant sect. Even within the Anglican Communion, they are small potatoes—with an ASA (average Sunday attendance) of something like 700,000. TEC, like the Donatists, has embraced its own peculiar theological position—a position rejected not only by the vast majority of Catholic Christendom, i.e., not only the Roman Catholics, the Orthodox, the vast majority of Reformation Churches, but, of course, the vast majority of churches in the Anglican Communion. (To the best of my knowledge, the only churches in the world that have decided to bless same sex unions or ordain openly gay clergy are (besides TEC), the Unitarians, the United Church of Christ, and the Metropolitan Community Church—hardly a company known for its strident orthodoxy or catholicity!) [Update: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has now been added to this list. A sad turn of events for a church that once committed itself to the authority of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions found in the Book of Concord.]

Like the Donatists, TEC has also refused to listen to Catholic Christendom. When warned repeatedly by the Anglican Communion that the consecration of Gene Robinson would break the Communion, they proceeded anyway. After the consecration, TEC has ignored repeated requests to turn back. When given until GC 2006 to turn back, TEC responded ambiguously. When given until Sept 30, 2007 to clarify whether they intended to turn back, TEC offered further obfuscation.

Like Donatism, TEC's actions have had international ecclesial consequences. The vast majority of churches in the Anglican Communion are out of or in impaired Communion with TEC at this point. Pope Benedict XVI made it clear when meeting with Rowan Williams that the new situation was unacceptable. The Orthodox Churches have broken off ecumenical relations with TEC.

But there are other parallels between the Donatist situation and the current situation in TEC. While a majority worldwide, the orthodox Catholics in North Africa were a minority in Northern Africa. While a minority in North America, orthodox Anglicans are a majority worldwide. But there is an additional parallel. Although the Donatists were the largest body that was a physical descendant of Catholic Christendom in Northern Africa, Augustine argued that, by refusing to heed the voice of Catholic Christendom worldwide, the Donatists were no longer a Catholic body. Augustine did not argue that, regardless of the Donatist errors, he must stay within the Donatist Church because they were the historical descendants of the Catholics in Northern Africa, and the largest ecclesial body that could claim Catholic descent. To the contrary, Augustine refused to share communion with them.

There were, accordingly, overlapping jurisdictions in Northern Africa. For every Donatist bishop, there was a Catholic bishop. When Catholic bishops outside Northern Africa recognized Augustine or visited him, they were guilty of "border crossing."

However, a far more relevant parallel is not between TEC and the Donatists, but between TEC and the Arians or Nestorians. TEC's new position on sexuality is every bit as much a departure from historic orthodoxy as were the theologies of Arius or Nestorius. I would argue, more so, because TEC's new theology is a rather clear repudiation of the authority of Scripture, and the adoption of an enthusiast ecclesiology. That the issue is not primarily about sexuality has been clear from the repeated statements of the Presiding Bishop and others that behind TEC's theology about sexuality is a pluralist soteriology that reduces Jesus Christ to one savior among many, and consequently has no definable soteriology or doctrine whatsoever, except for the doctrines of inclusiveness and diversity—which cannot be questioned. The Presiding Bishop's recent comments about the new Province are simply illustrative of the theology that she has voiced many times:

[Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori] emphasized that all Episcopalians were welcome "if they want to be part of a diverse church. . . . But the expectation has to be that we are not a single-issue church. We're not a church that says you have to believe this one thing in this one way and there is no room for difference of opinion."

There is no question in my mind what would have been the response of the two great bishops of Alexandria—Athanasius and Cyril—to a theology that said "you [do not] have to believe this one thing in this one way and there is [necessarily] room for difference of opinion." They broke communion with Arius and Nestorius over issues that some would regard as "differences of opinion." Any attempt to disparage those who have left TEC for GAFCON is ignoring the central issue unless it is recognized up front that the disagreement is not about "differences of opinion," but over what constitutes heresy. CCP (and the majority of the Anglican Communion) have not broken communion with TEC because Gene Robinson is a sinner. They have broken communion with TEC because TEC has embraced

heresy—and, despite repeated opportunities, has refused to repent.

There is, of course, another parallel between the TEC/Anglican Communion situation and the heresies of Arius and Nestorius. Unlike the Donatist situation—where the Donatists were a small private sect repudiated by all Catholics outside Northern Africa—the Church at the time of Arius and Nestorius was divided. There were times when the emperor supported Arianism, and there were times when Athanasius went into exile. As bishop of Constantinople, Nestorius was, for the Eastern Church, something like the equivalent of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Cyril and the Council of Ephesus excommunicated him, and refused to have communion with the Antiochian Church (which supported Nestorius), until they embraced Catholic orthodoxy. The Nestorian controversy resulted in a permanent split in the church—with the Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church out of communion to this day. Nonetheless, none at the time were willing to say: “This is just a matter of opinion, and you don’t have to believe one thing or another.”