

Why Not Leave?

Every once in awhile, a commenter on one of the orthodox Anglican blogs will raise the question: "Why not just leave?" Sometimes they're asking, "Why not leave the Episcopal Church?" Often these are ECUSA revisionists who are irritated because they've won the battle, or at least they thought they had, yet we're not dead, we're not willing to admit we've been defeated, and we refuse to quit fighting. We're ruining their victory. My own bishop [Andrew Smith of Connecticut] raised just this question for over half of his most recent annual diocesan convention speech. The answer, of course, is simple. We intend to keep you up at night.

But sometimes the question is not "Why don't you leave the Episcopal Church?," but "Why don't you leave Anglicanism?" Those who ask are often former Episcopalians who have found relief in another church, often Roman Catholic or Orthodox, and they are asking us to join them.

These are people who left Anglicanism because they saw that the ECUSAn ship was sinking. Often they speak out of genuine concern. They now stand safely on the shore, and they are offering a hand, as they fear it is only a matter of time before we sink beneath the waves. I do appreciate their concerns, which, I believe, are genuine.

Others, however, have left Anglicanism, and look back with either the hurt of disappointed lovers, or the anger of those who seem to believe themselves betrayed, who have been sold a bill of goods. The message I too often hear from these people is that not only is the ship sinking, but it was never anything but a leaky tub anyway, and the damned thing deserved to sink. Sometimes I detect even a note of gleefulness that the useless hulk is going down, and those who stay aboard deserve their fate. But whether they're hurt, or angry, or gleeful, the message is the same. Anglicanism was a bad deal

from the start. But it's not too late to get aboard the real ship, the one ship that will never sink.

I understand the hurt and resentment, because I feel it myself. But not the dismissal. If I were ever to leave Anglicanism, it could only be with a sense of loss, that a noble vision of what it meant to be Christian had been tried for a few centuries, had produced some remarkable successes, and had brought much good to the world. Sadly, it had come to an end, and its loss would be much like that of those parts of the Byzantine Empire that were obliterated by Islam, or the Celtic Christians who faded after Augustine of Canterbury. For me, this would mean that the Church of Cranmer's liturgy, and Hooker's theology, and Donne's preaching, and Herbert's poetry, and Traherne's meditations, and Shakespeare's plays, and Butler's keen intellect, and Jane Austin's novels, and Wilberforce's and Gore's social vision, and Westcott's and Hort's and Hoskyn's biblical scholarship, and Arthur Michael Ramsey and Evelyn Underhill and . . . C.S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, Austin Farrer . . . This Church would be gone forever. But wasn't it a glorious thing while it lasted!

So why not leave? I can only give my own reasons.

So, first. Leave for what? Rome or Orthodoxy would be the obvious choices. At least they are the ones that are usually offered. When as a young man I left the Evangelical denomination in which I was raised, I became an Anglican because I believed that the Reformation was a reforming movement in the Western Catholic Church, and I was convinced that Anglicanism had come closest to getting that job done right. For the Roman Catholics, Vatican II was successful just to the extent that it incorporated many of the changes that had taken place at some time or another in Anglican history. Liturgy in the vernacular? Check. Communion in both kinds? Check. Renewed emphasis on Scripture? Check. In good critical translations? Check. Religious liberty? Check. Focus on

salvation by grace alone and reconsideration of justification by faith? Check. Married clergy? Well . . . Vatican II didn't do everything.

At the same time, one thing has not changed. As I have always understood it, one only has two choices about the Roman Catholic Church. One either must become a Roman Catholic, or one can not. There is no maybe about becoming Catholic. To become a Catholic, one is required to accept all of that Church's claims, including its claims about itself. If one accepts those claims, then one has no choice but to convert. But if one does not, one also has no choice. In that case, one cannot become Roman Catholic. And the Roman Catholic Church itself says that one cannot.

I am unable to bring myself to believe Rome's claims. Without going into details for now, as someone trained in theology (at a Catholic University, no less), I am convinced that the choices here are between Newman's understanding of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity and Barth's. And I think Barth was right, and Newman wrong.

Well, then? What about Orthodoxy? I want to claim the Greek Fathers for my own, of course—Athanasius, Cyril, the Cappadocians. I am even excited about learning from such lesser known lights as Leontius of Byzantium and Maximus the Confessor. And I recognize that the Eastern Church never accepted the authority of the bishop of Rome in the way in which Rome came to understand it. And I think they were right in that.

However, as with Rome, there are a number of things that Orthodoxy demands that I cannot quite bring myself to accept. Some are doctrinal niceties, for example, the somewhat abstruse distinction between the divine essence and energies. Or the doctrine of the *filioque*. I think the Western view is correct on both points. But at bottom, as I said above, I became Anglican because I believed Anglicanism was a reforming

movement in the Western Church, and I am a Western Christian.

Mine is the tradition of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, but also of Hooker, and Luther, and Barth. A Western Orthodoxy that was able to embrace and incorporate this Western tradition (including the Reformers) as well as its own would be an Orthodoxy that I would find attractive, perhaps irresistible. But, to the contrary, Orthodoxy often seems rather to be suspicious of this entire Western tradition, including Augustine, and all who followed him. And, of course, such a Western Orthodoxy would look a lot like . . . historical Anglicanism.

As for leaving Anglicanism for another Reformation Church . . . what would be the point? All of the mainline Protestant churches are struggling with the same issue as is Anglicanism. The Episcopal Church is just ahead of the parade. The non-sacramental free church Evangelicals alone have stood their ground, and I admire them tremendously. But I left that tradition for a reason.

Finally, there is another reason. And that is that I am not willing to make this decision as an individual. Many years ago, I left one denomination as an individual, and joined another. I do not regret that choice, but since making it, I am committed to those who have become my companions. I have discovered true companions along the Christian journey in the Episcopal Church, and I do not intend to desert them. You dance with the one that brought you.

So this choice I will not make as an individual. When the orthodox in North American Anglicanism make the choice that they eventually will make, I intend for that choice to be my choice.

I do believe that something providential is happening in the current crisis in the Western churches. The crisis certainly is not peculiar to the ECUSA/TEC. I studied at a Roman

Catholic seminary and took courses at a Methodist seminary before I became an Episcopalian. I did my doctoral work at a major Catholic University. Modernism had thoroughly infested all three places.

My own theory is that Modernism is divine judgment on Western Christendom for the ecumenical failures of the Reformation. Because both Rome and the Churches of the Reformation were unable to recognize the face of Christ in each other, including even Reformation churches who refused to recognize that face in each other, the divine judgment is that those churches are becoming ones in which the face of Christ is no longer able to be recognized at all.

But in that case, the last thing confessing Christians in all the churches need is once again to draw lines in the sand against one another, to refuse to recognize Christ's face in those who affirm the same Scriptures and confess the same Creeds. I can only regard the voices of those who ask me to leave Anglicanism for either Rome or Orthodoxy or some other Reformation Church as asking me to deny that the face of Christ can be seen in this Church.

I believe that a sorting out is taking place—that in fact a separation must and will take place between those in the Churches who continue to affirm historic Christian faith, and those who have exchanged Christ for the world's pottage. The struggle is against apostasy and heresy, and it is both. Those who offer the safety of Rome or Orthodoxy are right about that. But in that struggle, I think it important that those who continue to confess Christ in each Church in which the divine judgment strikes, stand firm and resist the apostasy together. We stand our ground, shoulder to shoulder, where Christ has placed us in the battle.

And, of course, one of the things that Anglicanism shares with both Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy is that, unlike many Reformation Churches, we do not stand alone, but are part of

an international Communion, a Communion that has held firm to the faith. The Episcopal Church is not Anglicanism, indeed is no longer Anglican at all. And worldwide Anglicanism, the Anglicanism of the Communion, has made it clear that it recognizes the orthodox in North America as the inheritors of Anglicanism, and has asked us to stand firm as it acts on our behalf.

The future looks messy, of course, even frightening. But also exciting. Divine judgment is taking place, but also, I think, a renewed orthodoxy that will rise from the ashes of the apostasy of the mainline churches.

Or to return to our earlier analogy. The ship is indeed sinking. But there are life boats. And the orthodox need to keep as many together in the boats as possible.

The renewed orthodoxy may well consist of Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Methodists, and free church Evangelicals—who meet in storefronts, or who share each others buildings. When we have nothing but Christ, we may well see Christ in each others faces again. And, then, at the far side of all of this, perhaps the remnant Reformation Churches and Rome and the Orthodox will see Christ's face in one another again.

Why would anyone want to leave at such a time?