



August 25, 2003
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THE STAND
THE EPISCOPALIANS
HOMOSEXUALITY

By now, the confirmation of Bishop Gene Robinson, a gay man, is old news, sad to some but joyous to others. The Episcopal Church is a rare denomination. It often sets precedent, theologically, whether right or wrong. It boasts theological mavericks in its congregation and in its hierarchy. Many know of the work of John Shelby Spong, writing which has attacked traditional Christianity and demanded its radical reformation and reconstruction. There are many like him. Conservatives and traditionalists are surely in the minority in this church of 70 million.

The Wall Street Journal (Tuesday, August 12, 2003) published an article by Harvey Cox regarding this matter entitled A SCHISM AVERTED. The author states that the Episcopal Church has boldly confronted a most difficult issue and even in so doing, will avoid a major schism. Cox indicates the bold action the Episcopal Church took regarding issues past. Women, scripturally advised to keep silent in the churches were ordained as Episcopal priests. Some parishes seceded but the essential denomination went on. When the first female priest was consecrated as the first female bishop, more parishes seceded, but the denomination again went on. Now, when gays are ordained as priests, and now a homosexual consecrated as bishop, Cox says once again the Episcopal Church will go on, free of major schism. Perhaps, but perhaps not.

The Episcopal Church thinks of itself as a bridge church which combines the reliance on the Bible as infallible guide from the days of the Reformation with a strong Catholic emphasis on tradition. Hence, both Bible and tradition. The church also recognizes reason and experience as sources of authority. The Episcopal Church then recognizes four pillars which support and structure the church, namely:

- 1) The Bible
- 2) Tradition
- 3) Reason
- 4) Experience

The Episcopal hierarchy by and large will not allow any one of these four pillars to be asserted without being balanced by the others. When, for example, conservatives in the church quoted scripture condemning homosexual lifestyle and acts, such condemnation was insufficient no matter how direct without the balance of tradition, reason and experience. Church decision makers stated that the church would not merely rely on the biblical text itself but on the history of the text and its historical interpretation.

Conservatives then said that tradition would mitigate against the recognition by the church of homosexuality or homosexuals in position of authority. Not so, said the hierarchy for tradition refers not just to what has happened in the past, but also what is happening in the present. The God of history, they say, is active in the church and leading His people into new truth. Episcopalians, Trinitarians in practice, believe in the Divine or Holy Spirit which guides the church today, such a divine presence being quite as important as either the Father or the Son. It is then a living tradition, they say, which allows the church to consider accepting homosexuality.

Then comes reason. That, they say, should always be guided and corrected by scripture and tradition. Reasonable men and women can therefore interpret scripture and tradition, guided by it but not subjugated to it. In short, where they believe the Bible and especially biblical prohibitions are unreasonable, reason can trump both scripture and tradition.

And then comes experience. Homosexuality, they say, is on the grow, more widely accepted than ever as are the people who practice the lifestyle. Many local churches of different denominations, they say, have identified themselves as open and welcoming congregations although, ironically, the Catholic Church from which the Episcopal tradition is derived is not. Experience would prove that homosexuality is not a matter of right or wrong, they say, but something now to be accepted so that Christians and the church can deal with weightier issues such as poverty, the hungry, the poor in spirit, the prisoners and the like. Jesus, such denominations and now emphatically the Episcopal Church, never uttered so much as a syllable about homosexuality, pro or con, they say.

But, no matter the action of the Episcopal Church, the issue will not go away. Every denomination and indeed every local parish, including and especially independent churches, must deal with the issue both theologically and socially. There are those by the millions who think homosexuality is wrong theologically, biologically and socially. There are others who don't care, one way or the other, or see the matter as a non-issue, something to be decided by individuals and not institutions. Then, there are others who think the homosexual lifestyle and homosexuality generally are right, a lifestyle like any other to be decided by consenting individuals without consequence to society and without negative impact. What do you think?

There are those who think the biblical admonitions against homosexuality are right, controlling and infallible. There are those who think that these very same biblical admonitions and tradition, theologically and socially require that homosexuality be viewed as wrong. There are those who feel that reason, especially with regard to nature and biology, would regard the homosexual lifestyle as wrong as corroborated by the general and historical experience of mankind. Are all such thinkers to be regarded as bigots and without a right to champion their views? Apparently, Mr. Cox and the Episcopalians in the majority would think so.

No matter, it is an issue which will not go away, now or ever. The issue here is the ordination and consecration of gays as religious leaders in denominations. But there are perhaps even more compelling issues such as gay marriage, adoption, same-sex benefits, teaching the acceptance and understanding of the homosexual lifestyle in educational, social and philanthropic institutions (i.e., the Boy Scouts) just to name some. In all such issues, there are those who are dead set against, those who don't care one way or another, and those who are for in every sense. The battle on many fronts will go on, and on.

What do you think? These are issues which affect society at every level. It is vitally important that every human being, Christian or not, know what he or she thinks, and why, most especially why. And when, like the Episcopalians, the position and belief you hold is formed and structured by scripture, tradition, reason and experience, you should make your position known and why. That is important, for society as we know it will continue to react to homosexuality as it traditionally has, or it will be changed, and even radically changed by it.

Your call.