

Undermining the Episcopal Church

by the Rev. Thomas B. Woodward

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Part 1: Cheap Substitutions Are Not Acceptable¹

The single most disastrous thing to happen in what some have called our “Anglican Agony” was allowing certain factions in the right wing of the church to define the dimensions of our debate. What has had little, if anything, to do with Biblical authority or interpretation has been framed in just those terms, and the result has been disastrous. What might have been part of our tradition of internal struggles has been turned into the undermining of the Episcopal Church. In fact, there has been very little discussion across the Anglican Communion concerning Biblical authority. Whatever real discussion about the Bible has occurred has been focused on Biblical *interpretation*, not *authority* – and that has not been so much a discussion as a hurling of accusations back and forth. While undermining or destroying the Episcopal Church may not have been the conscious intent of all those who now call themselves the “orthodox,” that has clearly been the effect of their actions – and it is past time to demand some accountability.

It’s Not Discussion; It’s Trashing

The most obvious attempts to undermine the Episcopal Church have been political, as with the Network of Anglican Communion Dioceses and Parishes (“ACN”) yet-to-be-repudiated DVD, “Choose This Day.”² That video was produced to be used by the “orthodox” in visits to faithful Episcopalians, to draw them away from their parish churches into the web of the ACN vision of themselves as a necessary replacement for the Episcopal Church. The DVD consists of conversations with various Network leaders who denounce, denigrate, and disparage the Episcopal Church with one scandalous lie after another. Here are just a few quotes from the DVD:

- The Episcopal Church is a forgery.
- The Church has been hijacked.
- The Episcopal Church and its leadership have embraced a foreign and alien and pagan religion.
- Through the Episcopal Church God’s Holy Scripture was deliberately altered.
- They [the Episcopal Church] have opted for revisionism – namely, the desire to reject the Christian faith and embrace a non-Christian religion.
- They [the Episcopal Church] have consciously, deliberately repudiated Scripture and tradition and embraced a pagan religion.

¹ <http://episcopalmajority.blogspot.com/2007/08/undermining-of-episcopal-church-part-i.html>

² <http://www.anglicandecision.org/>

Of course, all the while accusations have been hurled at us, the Episcopal Church has continued to reverence Holy Scripture, to teach the Christian faith in its fullness, to celebrate the sacraments handed down through the ages, to represent the moral and spiritual vision and life of Jesus Christ in the world we live in, and to embrace the entire creation as the focus for our mission and ministry. What occurs in our congregations and in our dioceses is what has happened decade after decade, generation after generation and century after century. How awful that our faith and life as Episcopalians is now being characterized as “pagan” by a movement that reflects the very worst of Biblical fundamentalism, Puritan moralism, and a recent wave that distrusts ambiguity, doubt, mystery, and the presence of the Holy in human experience.

In the End, It is the Trashing of the Incarnation

Whether the undermining of the Episcopal Church has been conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional, it must be confronted and identified for what it is. This and following reflections will focus on just that. This first piece will explore some of the damage done to our church’s basic understanding of life as sacramental.

We are being victimized by a sophisticated kind of “bait and switch” in which codes and rule books are being substituted for a faith based on the Incarnation. The attack is upon our understanding of life as sacramental.

I can’t think of much else that is more important than our understanding of the sacraments and of life, itself, as sacramental. In its simplest form, that understanding underlies our whole notion of love. Thus, Frederick Buechner notes that when we say that God is Love, part of what we mean by that is that all love comes from God. There is no other source. Love is not one of the things that we can manufacture or create – it all comes from God and, further, it happens through us, for the other. In Christian marriage, it is the love of God which flows through the husband for the wife and through the wife for the husband and which so overflows the couple that it begins to fill those whose lives are touched by them.

Grant them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern for others. (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 429)

Much of our understanding of healing is similarly sacramental. We believe that in the Laying on of Hands for Healing it is the sacramental presence of Jesus Christ in the hands of the one praying which is flowing through the healer into the body, mind, and spirit of the one who is sick. We have ritualized that in the sacrament of Unction, with the anointing with oil for healing. We believe that God works through oil in the ministry of his healing.

One of the most startling aspects of the Christian faith is the belief that the miracles of Jesus are not, at least in the usual sense of the word, miracles at all! They are signs of something basic in the universe, focused through one person in time and space. Jesus touches a blind man and through his hands a powerful personal force enters the blind man’s body, reconnecting lost connections, revitalizing dormant tissue – a sign of the basic sacramental nature of Christ’s presence in the world.

The world is sacramental. It is alive with the continual sacramental presence of divine love, healing, and reconciling power. And so important to this: nothing is just what it seems. Thus, a kiss is never just four lips in close(est) proximity. With a kiss I can manipulate, I can lie, or I can be an agent of the transmittal of love – that most precious of all forces alive in the universe. What is crucial for us all to understand is that we cannot create love with our lips, our hearts, our spleen, or any other parts of ourselves. God is love – and as Buechner writes so well, whenever love enters this world, God enters.

Over against this basic understanding of the world as sacramental, the so-called “orthodox” seek to reduce our ethics to codes and objectivity that have no relationship to the presence of Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit in our lives. As an example, the ethics of human sexuality is being reduced to body parts – to “who can do what with what, where and to whom?” The Christian vision of human persons in community and of human sexuality itself has to do with relationship and trust and fidelity. It has to do with patience, forbearance, forgiveness, sacrifice, and kindness: signs for St. Paul that relationships and communities have already been blessed by God.

We see this worked out in how we think about marriage. For us, unlike so much in Roman Catholic theology, it is not relevant in discerning whether a proposed marriage will be a Christian marriage that a couple be fertile or that all their sexual equipment is in full working order. What has been crucial in the Episcopal Church is that the couple dedicate all aspects of their life together to the glory of God and to God’s service – and that their life together is characterized by the qualities mentioned above and in I Corinthians 13 and Galatians 5.

I believe the standard now is that we believe that God has already, in a real sense, blessed this couple – and the priest will be calling down God’s blessing on the patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and all the other fruits of the Spirit that, through God’s presence, are already part of the life of that couple.

Against that backdrop of the sacramental presence of God in human relationships, the so-called “orthodox” speak of two people of the same gender, having all the marks of being blessed by God, having made all the promises of living a life of hope, forgiveness, fidelity, and faithfulness, simply as “sodomites.” Sodomites. Nothing else matters. For the “orthodox,” it is as if that word describes the totality of two people in their life together. There will be no room for the blessing of that which has already been blessed by God; instead, there is only a squashing of the sacramental presence of Jesus Christ in the loving embrace of two people touched by a love that could only have come from God.

As the voices of condemnation from the fundamentalist right grow louder, the codes of conduct based on ancient presuppositions and fear grow more rigid and have less and less to do with personhood. Our Biblical mandate to look for the signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world is being overruled by their narrow vision of “who can do what with what, where, and to whom?” The next step, of course, will be for them to bring a strange kind of Biblical accountability to our married couples – branding those who engage in mutual masturbation, oral or anal sex as deviants, then sinners, and finally “sodomites.” The only couples fit for missionary service will be those solely devoted to the missionary position.

Hugh Hefner conferred a blessing on what was called the sexual revolution of the 1960s and ‘70s. In so doing, he laid the groundwork for the undermining of the Episcopal Church’s understanding of human sexuality. At the heart of Hefner’s “Playboy Philosophy” was the belief that sexual pleasure was primarily for its own sake, without any necessary connection to a human relationship. The woman was an “accessory” for the man to use for his gratification, period. There was no mystery in his understanding of our human sexuality or personhood, no room for the sacramental presence of love in the Playboy Philosophy – and that terribly destructive way of looking at ourselves and our life together is at the heart of the “orthodox” formula for relationships that can be pleasing to God.

The Abuse of the Sacraments

God will bless what God will bless. And we are fools – and unfaithful fools at that – when we do not open our eyes and our hearts to recognize what and whom God has blessed. Further, we take everything beyond foolishness when we take the sacramental reality of same-gender sexual expression of faithful love and the sacrament of Holy Communion and turn them into means, occasions, or instruments of exclusion and punishment.

Certain Anglican primates will not share in Holy Communion with our Presiding Bishop, because she is the wrong gender or because she expresses her deep commitment to Jesus Christ in different images than they. Some bishops of the Episcopal Church exhibit the same shunning in meetings of the House of Bishops and at General Convention. Now we hear that these same bishops may not even attend the Lambeth Conference next year with one of their own, because he has a human accessory (partner) different from their own. These are not offenses against Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori or Bishop Gene Robinson; they are offenses against the sacramental presence of Jesus Christ in their office and in their ordained ministry.

This is not all about sex and human sexuality. It is about our understanding of the sacramental nature of all of life. When that kind of understanding and faith gets squeezed into codes and rules, it is no longer faith. St. Paul, at his best, noted that we are to work out our salvation by fear [respect] and trembling; he sensed the complexity and the richness of our faith. He knew, as our church has known, that our faith is rooted in a living relationship with an ever-present God, not in a rule-book or set of codes.

As I think about this struggle between sacramental presence and restrictive code and the attempted replacement of our faith by “orthodox” moralisms, the words of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel jump off the page:

“What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?”

I imagine the so-called orthodox would respond, “So what’s the problem?” Well, there is a problem with substituting cheap codes for grace and ostracism for engagement. Our church needs to keep our larder well stocked with fish and eggs and let those who would undermine our church take their serpents and scorpions elsewhere. This is not the time to accept any cheap substitutions.

Author’s Note: Sources include Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC,³ by Frederick Buechner (p. 50 ff.) and “The Mystery of Sex”⁴ at Tom Woodward’s blog, Turning Things Upside Down.⁵

³ <http://www.amazon.com/Wishful-Thinking-Seekers-Frederick-Buechner/dp/0060611391>

⁴ http://turningthingsupsidedown.blogspot.com/2006/03/mystery-of-sex_18.html

⁵ <http://www.turningthingsupsidedown.blogspot.com/>

Part 2: Blasting Away at the Bedrock⁶

There are some things that are bedrock in any denomination or church. In the Episcopal Church, there are several things that are bedrock, among which are

- the Book of Common Prayer;
- our commitment to Scripture, tradition, and reason as determinative of doctrine; and
- our insistence on the full participation of the laity in our worship and governance.

Bedrock is important because it gives us a place to stand when all else seems up for grabs. It provides us the safety and security necessary for our life in a terribly complex and often puzzling world. Bedrock also has allowed us over the centuries to be a church with incredibly varied and diverse people and perspectives. Without bedrock there is no security, no dependability, and no way to hold a diverse and sometimes doubting community together.

We in the Episcopal Church have never maintained that we are the True Church, nor have we claimed there is no salvation outside the Episcopal Church. What we say is that we are the church that rests on this particular bedrock – and in doing so we claim a unique place within the full Body of Christ, which is the fellowship of the baptized, whether Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Church of Christ, or Two Seed in the Pod Double Predestinarian Baptists. If the Episcopal Church is not for you, there are a number of faithful churches that can provide you with the spiritual support and challenge you need.

Sometimes a local Episcopal congregation must seem a little like Grand Central Station, with people coming into the church from one denomination at the same time others are leaving for different ones. Some come into us or leave us to become Roman Catholics for one reason or another, while their friends next door decided to join our church when they married or committed their life to a partner who was and remains an Episcopalian. There is a certain integrity in leaving one church for another, especially when the leaving is the result of prayer and consultation.

What is new in the Episcopal Church is that a group of people unhappy about parts of life within the Episcopal Church are not thinking of leaving, but of *replacing* the Episcopal Church with a church of their own making. Further, they are proceeding in a way that smears the existing structures and leadership of the church, reinvents its history and theology, disobeys its Constitution and Canons, and undermines nearly every aspect of its life. The people who are doing “a new thing” are those who are seeking to undercut or destroy the very bedrock of our church.

How Have They Done This?

Scripture

Some of the greatest contributions of our church to the world have come through our profound reverence for Holy Scripture and our centuries of scholarship devoted to its study and translation. As new Biblical texts have been recovered, Episcopalians and other Anglicans have assisted in providing more accurate texts, and these have led Christians world-wide into a deeper understanding of Scripture. Churches and denominations from around the world have looked to us for leadership in the study and understanding of the Bible, as well as for steering a

⁶ <http://episcopalmajority.blogspot.com/2007/08/undermining-episcopal-church-part-2.html>

course between the equal dangers of fundamentalism and rationalism. We, with mainstream Anglicans, have understood Scripture to be profoundly meaningful and often nuanced and contextual.

What a shock it is now to hear the so-called “orthodox” claim that our centuries of study and scholarship are for nothing, because they have discovered the “one and only” interpretation of text after text that have traditionally been open to several different interpretations and meanings. Against the rich backdrop of centuries of scholarly contributions to the whole church, the “orthodox” have adopted a mantra of defending “the faith once and for all delivered to the saints” – a catch phrase meaning “what I very much want Scripture to mean and nothing else, ever.”

The repeated excoriation of our Presiding Bishop and other church leaders over the interpretation of John 14:6 has been perhaps the worst example of this reductionism and impoverishment of Scripture. This is the verse in which John has Jesus saying, “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me.”

Without a doubt, that verse and others in John were important in the early church as it sought to establish itself as different from the rest of Judaism. However, there is a whole body of parables, teachings, and actions of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke which clearly contradict the strict exclusivism demanded by the “orthodox” in their interpretation of the text.

In the past, Anglicans have been able (even eager!) to live with the tension of the different strands in the four Gospels on this and so many other issues in the Scriptures. What has changed is that the “orthodox” have turned that single verse, John 14:6, into a litmus test for faithfulness! If you don’t share their narrow interpretation of this text, “you are not just different – you are not a Christian!” And to think that up until just five or six years ago we all thought that “Christian” meant one who is attempting to follow Jesus as Lord. Now, for some, “Christian” means one who is following one fundamentalist understanding of what one Gospel writer believed about Jesus while others did not. If you think that is convoluted – it is.

When this kind of narrowness is coupled with a selective Biblical fundamentalism of choosing half-verses in isolated parts of the Bible to condemn homosexuality while discarding the other half of the verses, you have something quite different from what we have always known as an Episcopal or Anglican Church.

The “orthodox” are not the first group to cut and paste with the Bible. The heretic Marcion was the first. However, no one doing that in the past claimed to represent the Episcopal Church or anything like it.

I believe we need to say this clearly: if you can’t live with the whole Bible, accepting its authority and meaning with the assistance of tradition, reason, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, you probably belong in a different church.

Let me state my concern succinctly: Those who attempt to impose the results of a cut-and-paste approach to the Bible on the Episcopal Church undermine what we are at our best. We did not accept Thomas Jefferson’s Marcion-like job of cutting and pasting the Bible when it was popular – and we won’t accept the current “orthodox” versions of it now.

Full Participation by the Laity

When we Episcopalians talk about our church to others, one of the things we most often mention is the central place of the laity in the Episcopal Church. Lay people are involved at every level of our church’s life. On a diocesan level, they control the church’s program through their votes at Convention. They also serve as a check on the bishop’s use of power through their membership on our Standing Committees. On both the diocesan and national levels of the

church, nothing significant can happen without the assent of the laity. In the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer, the laity is listed as the first order of ministry in the Episcopal Church:

Q Who are the ministers of the Church?

A The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.
(*BCP, p. 855*)

It is infuriating to note that over the past several years we have heard much about the power and privilege of bishops and primates from the wider Anglican Communion, but precious little from them about the central place of the laity in the governance of the church. Instead, we are told that “the bishops meeting at Lambeth Palace decided that the teaching of the Anglican Church is . . .” even though Lambeth is only bishops speaking with one another – and has never before been seen as a legislative body. They do not get to legislate in these matters without their clergy and laypeople. To pretend otherwise is to disregard the core of who we are as the Episcopal Church.

It is bad enough that some bishops want to turn the Lambeth Conference – which was intended as a collegial gathering for bishops to consult with one another – into a legislative body. Even worse, just in the last few years, the meeting of archbishops [called the Primate Meeting] has been described as an “instrument of unity,” when it is, in many ways, functioning to destroy our traditional unity. Our church, rich in democratic structure, is being asked to accede to the demands of a group that consists, not just of bishops alone, but of primates alone – no laity, no priests, and only one woman in the room (whom many of the men recognize only for the purpose of shunning her).

However, there is long standing tradition in the Anglican Communion that we don’t all have to be in lock step. In some parts of the Anglican Communion, the bishops do make the rules and define doctrine without consultation with anyone. In fact, it is the exception in the Anglican Communion to have bishops who are elected! To my knowledge, outside the Episcopal Church there is no province in which the bishops are accountable to anything like our Standing Committees. That is OK . . . for them. But it is not OK for some in the Episcopal Church who are uncomfortable with our democratic structure to demand that we turn our back on our own history and on one of our proudest possessions. It is not OK for them to attempt to replace our church with a monarchical model of authority that we rejected in our very founding! It is not OK for them to suggest turning our church over to a group of foreign prelates when that very structure was rejected in the very birth of Anglicanism itself.

The subtext of the Dar es Salaam ultimatum⁷ presented to our church by the unelected primates is this: “We demand that you act without your laypeople, just as we do, so you can be one of us.” The truth is that we are one of them, by virtue of our baptism; but they are demanding that we sacrifice much of the meaning of our baptism by jerking away the authority which our church vests in all the baptized!! We can be grateful to our House of Bishops⁸ for standing up, not just for themselves, but for the church as the body of all the baptized.

It is one thing to disagree about important matters, like the place of the laity in the life of the church – it is quite another to stomp on this part of our bedrock!

⁷ http://www.episcopalchurch.org/3577_82571_ENG_HTM.htm

⁸ <http://episcopalmajority.blogspot.com/2007/03/bishops-adopt-three-resolutions.html>

The Book of Common Prayer

A consortium of break-away groups of so-called “orthodox” Anglicans in North America have adopted their Common Cause Theological Statement, in which they proclaim their loyalty, not to the Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church, but to the Prayer Book of 1662!⁹ Apparently they believe that heresy has ruled the Episcopal Church from our founding – in fact, even a century before our founding! They seem to believe we have had it all wrong for some 345 years – right from the beginning!

All that scholarship, all that liturgical renewal, all those gains in understanding of the Gospel through internationally known and respected theologians, essayists, teachers and spiritual guides is for nothing? Are they telling us it has all been the work of The Great Distractor? That, of course, is not what they say, but that is the only conclusion possible from what they say.

We can only wonder about the 1662 Book of Common Prayer¹⁰ and the theology that undergirds it at this time of our lives. Why would anyone go back to it as the source of doctrine, discipline, and understanding of the Christian life,

Here are a few highlights of what the 1662 prayer book includes and which the Network and allied groups apparently want to impose upon the Episcopal Church.

- The marriage service affirms the ideal relationship between men and women with “I *N*. take thee, *N*, to be my wedded husband, to love, cherish, and obey. . . “ There is no such requirement upon the husband, of course.
- In the liturgy for the Churching of Women, women are to come into the church soon after childbirth so the church can pray away their uncleanness, giving further support to an ancient assumption of the innate uncleanness of women, with all the baggage that carries.
- In the Communion, there is the plea that the public humiliation, punishment and repentance of sinners be reestablished in the church as spectacle. (While this would doubtless prove a boost to attendance near the beginning of Lent with people flocking to observe the degradation of noted sinners in the community, it would probably hurt attendance when newcomers discovered that they could very well be next for the ritual of public punishment and repentance.)
- The Eucharist, far from a proclamation and celebration of the Real Presence of Jesus Christ, reverts back to a Protestant Free Church memorial meal under the 1662 prayer book.

While there are some gems and some wonderful turns of phrases in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, it does not take much to see that the move to adopt that prayer book as the standard of orthodoxy for the Episcopal Church is an attempt to undermine that which us at our very best.

Further, one can only shudder at the concomitant resurrection of the Thirty Nine Articles as having authority over our life, but that is another story.

Let me say it again: It is one thing to disagree about Scriptural interpretation, the place of the laity in the governance of the church, and about the wisdom or faithfulness of reversion to a time of misogyny in the church; however, when some people – acting in the name of a false orthodoxy – demand that we repent of our vision and sacrifice our best to their narrow understanding of our faith and life, we must say “No! We will not allow our rich comprehensiveness in theology, liturgy, and governance to be undermined by your narrowing vision.” This is a time for faith, not

⁹ See <http://episcopalmajority.blogspot.com/2007/03/bishops-adopt-three-resolutions.html> for a list of “Common Cause” partners and their theological statement.

¹⁰ See <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/england.htm> for an online version.

fear. After all, Jesus said he had come to fulfill the Law, not to strengthen its hold on us. That is a vision worth living and worth protecting.

Author's Note: I am especially grateful for the insight and editorial support of the people at The Episcopal Majority.

Part 3: A Case of Spiritual Adultery¹¹

Canon Brooks' memorandum on the Anglican Constitution reflects some of Father Woodward's observations about the current shredding of the authority of the laity by those who want to discipline the Episcopal Church.¹²

We have a curious situation in the Episcopal Church. Several bishops, whose chief duty is the oversight of their dioceses, are publicly opposed to their church – and this is not simply a matter of having serious concerns about one's church. A number of bishops and others were actively critical of the church in the 1960s and '70s. What is different in the current situation is that these bishops are not speaking primarily from within the church and to the church. Rather, they are placing themselves outside the church and vilifying our church from that "outside" position. In addition, these bishops are active members of organizations such as the Anglican Communion Network and CANA that have been working for years to replace the Episcopal Church! On the whole, their strategy has consisted of public verbal attacks on the church, while seeking alliances wherever they can be found around the globe.

As noted in Part 2, their pronouncements on the authority and interpretation of Scripture, their shredding of the authority of the laity in the church, and their decision to substitute the theology and ethics of a misogynist prayer book for our 1979 Book of Common Prayer represent a consistent attack on the very church that continues to pay their salaries. It also represents a repudiation of the vows these bishops and many priests made before God – and without which they would not have been ordained priests or bishops – although few will acknowledge that. There is a name for this – not a pretty name at all – but that will come later.

At the consecration of a bishop in the Episcopal Church, the one being consecrated makes a solemn vow before God. Along with marriage vows, the words and the promise made at one's ordination are the most solemn any human being can utter. In the 1928 Book of Common Prayer the vow is this:

"In the Name of God, Amen. I, N., chosen Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in N., do promise conformity and obedience to the Doctrine, Discipline, and Worship of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. So help me God, through Jesus Christ." (*BCP*, p. 552)

If you chose not to make the vow, you were not consecrated. Note that the vow of obedience is to the Doctrine, Discipline, and Worship of the Episcopal Church, not to "what I believe the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the church should be" or "what primates from other parts of the Anglican Communion tell me it ought to be." Note, also, there is no qualifier such as "all things being equal . . ." or ". . . until I believe otherwise." The vow is absolute. In the 1979 Book of Common Prayer the vow is similar:

"I do solemnly engage to conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of The Episcopal Church." (*BCP*, p. 523)

This is on top of the vow made at one's priesting and when being ordered deacon:

¹¹ <http://episcopalmajority.blogspot.com/2007/09/undermining-of-episcopal-church-part-3.html>

¹² <http://episcopalmajority.blogspot.com/2007/09/who-has-power.html>

“Will you be loyal to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of Christ as this Church has received them? And will you, in accordance with the canons of this Church, obey your bishop and other ministers who may have authority over you and your work?” (*BCP, pp. 526 and 538*)

Why Are Ordination Vows Important?

In our church, we take marriage vows very seriously. The vows made at ordination are equally serious. Why is that so?

First, St. Paul in Romans 9-11 goes to great pains to assert that when God makes a promise, that promise is unbreakable. Otherwise, God would be untrustworthy. The same is true with our Lord’s promises of faithfulness to his vocation: for Jesus, the cross is preferable to the slightest deviation from his promise of obedience to the Father.

It is in that context that clergy and religious (monks and nuns) make their vows. When we break our ordination or consecration vows, we undermine the credibility of the Christian Church, the Body of Christ we were ordained or consecrated to serve. When we break these vows and walk the walk of disobedience, we repudiate before our people the unique power of the Cross. Simply stated, we commit spiritual abuse on those who trust us to keep our vows.

Second, when dealing with a married couple when one of the couple wants out of the marriage to begin or continue with a different partner, the advice of professionals is almost always the same: deal first with the stresses and anguish within your marriage, then divorce if you must. Only then – and only after a period of time – should you consider any new affiliation.

The same applies to one’s vows to the church. Spiritual adultery (pretending to be faithful to one while cleaving to another) is just that – spiritual adultery. It is holding onto your position of pledged loyalty and trust at the same time you are betraying it. Spiritual adultery – like marital adultery – tears at the hearts of too many people, including the heart of the adulterer, to be tolerated.

Then Why Do These Vows Seem To Mean So Little?

It is scandalous for ordained men (very few women) to stand in the pulpit of the church that nurtured and ordained them, urging their congregation to break faith with the Episcopal Church. That is a violation on so many levels. It is breaking one’s vows publicly. It is a violation of one’s fiduciary responsibility to the Episcopal Church, to one’s diocese, and to one’s parish church. And it makes a mockery of anything like integrity.

What does a person with integrity do when faced with irreconcilable differences with his or her employer? Do you quit? Do you continue to draw your salary while attempting to discredit, smear, or even destroy your employer? Or do you remain loyal, while working to find ways to resolve what seemed to be irreconcilable differences?

The answer is clear to those in leadership of the Anglican Communion Network and related organizations. They continue to draw their salaries and they continue to enjoy the perquisites of their positions in the Episcopal Church while they work nearly full-time to discredit and undermine the church. What is true for them, unfortunately, is true for many “orthodox” parish priests: rather than resign from the church they vilify and undermine, they use the power and prestige of their positions in our church in an attempt to replace or empty it.

It's Gone Way Past Flirting

On another level, there are dioceses – such as the California Diocese of San Joaquin – which are attempting to remove any references to its constitutional dependence upon the Episcopal Church from its own Constitution and Canons. Why would those proposing such a move not simply resign from the church they so despise, instead of undermining and destroying it?

In similar fashion, it is clear that Pittsburgh's bishop, Bob Duncan, in explaining his reasons for seeking Alternative Primatial Oversight (someone other than our Presiding Bishop) for his diocese, knows and his attorneys know that such a move is illegal and completely against the polity of the Episcopal Church, which he has sworn to honor.

Bishops Duncan and Iker traveled to Kenya to take part in the 30 August 2007 consecration of two American priests as bishops who will represent foreign jurisdictions invading our own church in the United States! The violation of the Constitution and Canons of our church could not be more complete. The only analogy that comes to mind is a few chickens leaving the coop to deliver some steroids to a group of hungry foxes on their way to the hen house. My own conclusion is that Bishop Duncan and others should first deal with their ordination and consecration vows of loyalty to the Episcopal Church and its doctrine and discipline. They should have done so without involving their clergy or the people of their dioceses or congregations.

Bishop Duncan and others in our church could and should have done the honorable thing. They should have taken a leave of absence to sort things out with peers or spiritual advisors. If they decided they could no longer honor their vows, they should have announced their decision to leave the ordained ministry of the Episcopal Church. (After all, without those vows, none of these men would have been ordained or consecrated in the first place.) Once separated from their vows, these clergy would be free to seek out whatever succor or position they wanted in the church of God. Alternatively, they might have reached a different conclusion, after which they could have held a private ceremony of recommitment to their ordination and consecration vows.

For a bishop to encourage his clergy [and it is all male bishops at this point] to follow anything but this process is, I believe, “conduct unbecoming” – one of the grounds for presentment and trial of a bishop. From my own experience of leadership in the civil rights movement and the Sanctuary movement, I know how beguiling power and the attraction of being in the opposition can be. Those of us who have been more or less successful in resisting the evil hold of those things are fortunate, while those who succumb to that beguiling promise of self-importance always end up doing more damage than any good they might have envisioned.

The Property Issue

Some of this duplicity is reflected in the various attempts of several bishops and priests to take away the property belonging to the Episcopal Church as they strike out for life in one of the acronymous churches (such as CANA, AMiA, etc.). Who wants to present himself to a foreign jurisdiction with no property, no buildings, no cash, and in desperate need of a copy machine? Is the primate of the Church in Nigeria or Bolivia going to be happy with a new mission of 500 people in New Mexico or Florida, requiring full financial support from their own strained budgets? How about 20 such congregations?

The Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church are clear as clear can be about who owns the property. In order to be admitted into the Episcopal Church as a diocese, the petitioners have to agree that all their property is held in trust for the Episcopal Church, governed by the General Convention and Executive Council. When a group petitions to become a parish in a diocese, they have to agree, again in writing, that all their property is held by them in

trust for the diocese and through the diocese for the national church. That has always been so in this church.

How can we think about the property grab by those leaving the Episcopal Church? It is probably like a teenage boy who joins a neighborhood basketball game. He plays happily and then discovers that the other boys have made a rule change he doesn't like. What does he do? He picks up their basketball and goes home.

When anyone claims an independent right to the property of their parish church, they are acting outside church law. When people leaving the Episcopal Church argue that it was their money that built and maintained the church, they need to be reminded that when we donate money or property to the church, we relinquish any right or control over that money. Ask your church treasurer: every receipt of gifts given to the church and every pledge statement is required to note that the only thing you get for your gift consists of spiritual, not material benefits. You can't claim a tax deduction for a charitable donation to the church, and then claim that it was an investment! The legal consequences of that dodge are considerable.

The particulars about our Constitution and Canons as they relate to our current struggles have been explored in a number of places. My point is that there is a disgraceful lack of integrity among those who remain on the church's payroll while undermining it and among those who leave while they attempt to take with them the property that belongs to those they call apostate. Let us be clear: their actions and attitudes undermine not only the church that nurtured and (for the clergy) ordained them, but the holiness and seriousness of the baptismal or ordination vows they made.

This is spiritual adultery, and it is time to name it as spiritual adultery. The issues and concerns in our "Anglican Agonies" are not just differences of opinion. This goes way beyond differences of opinion: the undermining of our Book of Common Prayer, our commitment to the full participation of the laity, our long tradition of honoring the Bible and its authority in the church and in our lives, and the holiness of our vows and our signed agreements about property is about destroying the bedrock of our church's existence. As such, it is an offense not just against those with whom you disagree: it's an offense against God.

Part 4: Replacing the Christ with a Code¹³

This is the most important and also the most difficult part of this series on The Undermining of the Episcopal Church: most important because the notion of a static Christian morality undermines not just the Episcopal Church – but the Christian faith itself; most difficult because few of us are able to distinguish the Christian faith as separate from our favorite Christian morality.

The Issue

When the leadership of the Network¹⁴ and similar groups call the Episcopal Church heretical or “non-Christian,”¹⁵ what they are referring to is *not* our failure to adhere to the historic creeds of the church or to Jesus Christ as savior. What they are referring to is our adherence to a moral code that is not identical to their own! While many “orthodox” Christians may believe their code is moral, as we shall see, that code is not in any way Christian.

When some church leaders from around the world charge homosexual people in loving, committed relationships with sexual immorality or rebellion against the will of God, they undermine the very basis of our faith – not just as Episcopalians, but as Christians.

These are strong statements, and I want to address them – not by adding to the polemics, but by focusing on several crucial underpinnings of Christian morals and morality. In this essay, I will address the nature of revelation, the problem with a single or “authoritative Christian ethics,” the unacknowledged ways moral principles often conflict with one another, the empirical record of necessary and sometimes sudden shifts in Christian ethics and morality at critical times, and the bizarre notion that there is a timeless “faith once delivered to the saints.”

The Nature of Revelation

For Episcopalians and most Anglicans, revelation has not been propositional; that is, it is not a set of precepts and rules. It has been primarily an understanding of the response of Israel to the actions of God in the world and through the person of Jesus Christ. We refer to Jesus Christ as the Word of God in good part because he is “What God meant to say.” After the great dancer, Pavlova, performed one evening, a patron asked her, “What did you mean by that dance?” She responded, “Had I been able to say it in words, I would not have danced it.” So, too, with God. God sent Jesus to live among us because Jesus was “what God meant to say” to us humans.

The Word of God is found primarily in the life, teaching, parables, and actions of Jesus, recorded in the Gospels:

- the calling of the tax collector, Levi, as apostle. [*Luke 5:27-32*]
- Jesus’ eating (“having table fellowship”) with those branded as the greatest sinners. [*Mark 2:13-17, Matthew 9:9-13, Luke 5:27-32 and 15:1-2*],
- the Beatitudes, in which Jesus describes those who constitute the Kingdom. [*Matthew 5:1-12*]
- the parable of the Wedding Feast, where those furthest from the moral and spiritual center of the community are welcomed and honored. [*Matthew 22:2-14 and Luke 14:15-24*]

¹³ <http://episcopalmajority.blogspot.com/2007/09/undermining-of-episcopal-church-part-4.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.acn-us.org/>

¹⁵ <http://www.anglicandecision.org/>

- the parable of the Leaven, in which the Kingdom is described as the mixture of the purity of the flour and the corruption (that is the New Testament usage of the word) of the leaven. [*Matthew 13:33 and Luke 13:20-21*]
- the honoring of the Samaritan [*Luke 10:29-37*], the Syro-Phoenician woman [*Mark 7:25-30 and Matthew 15:21-28*], the rich Zaccheus [*Luke 19:1-10*] and the poor [*Matthew 25*],
- Jesus' demand that love – not outward observance – is the measure of morality [see, for instance, *Matthew 23:25-26*. For an analysis of the rejection of the purity code by Jesus, see “*The Parables of Jesus from the Inside*,” by Thomas B. Woodward, *Sewanee Theological Review, Volume 47:1, Christmas 2003*], and
- Jesus' constant undercutting of the religious establishment and the purity laws in his parables and teaching.

Is there another strain in the Gospels? Of course there is! Jesus said “not one jot or tittle shall pass from the Law until all is fulfilled.” That verse seems to be the good news for the “orthodox.” The bad news is that inclusivity, diversity, and grace outnumber Jesus' affirmations of the purity code in a ratio probably greater than 30 to 1.

What Does a Christian Morality Have to Do with Jesus?

Here is what C. H. Dodd wrote in *Gospel and Law: The Relation of Faith and Ethics in Early Christianity* (Columbia University Press, 1951, p. 39):

“Since the church ... is one with Christ as the body with its head, it follows that its members are to find in Him an objective standard of ethical conduct.”

That makes sense, doesn't it? Then why – instead of looking to the Word of God, whose vision of the Kingdom is so expansive – have we spent so many years looking to the words of the author of Leviticus and of Paul? We need to remember that Paul does not claim Jesus as his inspiration for narrowing the Kingdom by excluding those who, from all we know of the Gospel record, would have been precious to Jesus. He does that on his own.

This same concern is echoed by Jacques Ellul, William Stringfellow's French compatriot:

“This is why Jesus attacks the Pharisees so severely even though they are the most moral of people, live the best lives, and are perfectly obedient and virtuous. They have progressively substituted their own morality for the living and actual Word of God that can never be fixed in commandments.” (*The Subversion of Christianity*, Eerdmans, 1986, page 70)

Oddly enough, most unchurched young people in this country seem to have it right. When told of the condemnation of Bishop Gene Robinson's consecration and of gay and lesbian relationships by segments of our church, they ask: “What happened to Jesus? and what happened to the Christian principle of love?”

Conclusion #1: The preoccupation with homosexual relationships as sinful may be rooted in Biblical material and supported through the church's tradition, but it does not represent Christian morality except, mistakenly, in name.

Rejoinder: But aren't there statements in the Bible declaring homosexual activity sinful?

Mark Noll, writing in *The Christian Century* last year,¹⁶ noted the similarity between our debates about homosexuality and those in 1845 concerning the Bible's view of slavery. He recounts a great debate in which Nathan Rice argued the specific pro-slavery texts and Jonathan Blanchard argued for the "general principles of the Bible" and "the whole scope of the Bible" in language remarkably similar to our debates today. While Rice won the hearts of the Biblical fundamentalists, Blanchard's argument has come to represent Christian ethics by virtue of its links to the teaching and life of Jesus.

Speaking to the same issue, Henry Ward Beecher conceded that a defense of slavery [similarly, I maintain, to a rationale for condemning homosexual relationships] could be teased out of obscure, individual texts of scripture, but surely the defining message of the Bible was something else entirely. In his sermon of January 4, 1861, Beecher strenuously appealed to the general meaning of the Bible, as opposed to the pedantic literalism that undergirded the pro-slavery view:

"I came to open the prison-doors," said Christ; and that is the text on which men justify shutting them and locking them. "I came to loose those that are bound"; and that is the text out of which men spin cords to bind men, women, and children. "I came to carry light to them that are in darkness and deliverance to the oppressed"; and that is the Book from out of which they argue, with amazing ingenuity, all the infernal meshes and snares by which to keep men in bondage. It is pitiful. [Quoted in Noll.¹⁷]

The Utter Foolishness of a Single, Authoritative Christian Morality

Early Christianity was often referred to as "The Way," which many Chinese Christians consider to echo or reflect the notion of Tao. [See "These Three Are the Treasures" in our *Wonder, Love and Praise* hymnal.] One of the benefits of the description is its accurate portrayal of the young church as different from surrounding groups that were dependent on structures with strict rules for the ordering of their lives. Though humankind seems to have a penchant for the security of rules and proscriptions, Jesus refused to give into that penchant. Instead, he spoke of human qualities in the Beatitudes, as Paul did of the marks of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5. In what we have in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) Jesus speaks in hyperbole and metaphor, but not with rules and regulations. Christianity is not a set of rules and regulations to which one gives assent; it is a response in faith to the revelation in Jesus Christ.

If we are judged, Paul and Jesus both suggest, we are judged by the quality of our caring and of our relationships. The question is: How do your life, your relationships reflect the gifts of the Holy Spirit? What are the marks of Christlike love in your life with other people? You can't get there by a list of do's and don'ts!

We need to remember that our moral life is grounded in faith – in our relationship with God through faith. "We betray ourselves when we identify Christianity with a particular morality," writes Ellul. "There have been Christian moralities through the ages, but Christianity is a faith and involves a relationship of faith as a community – it has never been a morality, in competition with other moralities, though many inside and particularly outside the church have attempted to make it so." We must not embrace a morality that transforms our religion of faith

¹⁶ <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-145473606.html>

¹⁷ <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-145473606.html>

and grace into a generalized list of do's and don'ts that may or may not reflect current circumstance.

Ironically, if there were a perennial Christian morality, it would look much different from ours today. If it were to be patterned only on the words and teaching of Jesus, we would all be pacifists, fully and absolutely committed to the poor, with slight regard for what are now called "family values," and with even less respect for civil authority than what is embedded in our prayer books.

Here is what happens when we base our moral code on selected Biblical passages: in our history, that kind of thinking has led to our providing moral and military support for crusades and the Inquisition, centuries and centuries of church inspired anti-semitism, the segregation of our churches by race, the subjugation of women in marriage and in the culture, and on and on and on. Each and all of these confident moralities of their times fails the tests of divine love and of any real relationship to the person and the teaching of Jesus. They fail especially when compared to Jesus' teaching in the parables of inclusion and reversal, such as the Leaven, the Marriage Feast, the Good Samaritan and the Pharisee and the Publican. Yet, despite all we should have learned from that history, we continue to enshrine our personal prejudice into what we hold out as a timeless code of conduct. When we do that, we settle for the antithesis of a Christian morality.

Conclusion #2: Our moral rules, even when blessed with small Scriptural warrant and use over time, may, in fact, contradict the Truth or the Way as revealed in Jesus Christ – or in the overwhelming witness of the prophets and writers of the Wisdom literature of the Bible. When they do, we should abandon them, as our forebears have done over and over again through the centuries. Otherwise, we bring disgrace upon our faith and upon our God.

Morality – Even Christian Morality – Often Conflicts with Itself

I was once involved in a public debate on the subject of abortion with a very articulate and very conservative priest at a clergy conference. He argued sanctity of life, and I argued the spiritual values and principles of several exceptions to an absolute ban on abortions. At one point I said, "I am afraid to say 'sanctity of life,' because I fear I may have to give up important exceptions – and you are afraid to allow even a single exception for fear of having to give up your belief in the absolute sanctity of life." We discovered that we were arguing about a paradox. When we acknowledged that life can conflict with life and that we are not often in a position to choose between good and evil, but among goods or between the lesser of several evils, we found that we could live together with love and mutual acceptance.

Any absolutist version of Christian morality has no place for that insight and reality. Living morally as a Christian is full of doubt and discernment and struggle. While Christian pacifism is thoroughly Biblical and a powerful witness to the teaching and person of Jesus Christ, we stand in awe of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's¹⁸ struggle between that deep, deep strain within himself and the opposing morality of resisting Hitler's evil with violence.

As an example of how quickly things do change, consider that following World War I, it was largely the influence of ethicists and theologians at Union Theological Seminary that helped our nation develop what some have called a "national pacifism" in response to the horrors of that war. It was in the early 1940s that many of the same faculty at the same seminary helped

¹⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer

American Protestantism come to terms with the necessity of Christians to participate in World War II as an expression of their faith. That conflict between religious principles remained through World War II and future conflicts, as young men struggled with the effects of their religious upbringing in deciding whether or not to file as conscientious objectors to participation in armed combat. Many found they could count on their church for support for either conclusion!

Our understanding of Christian marriage has undergone exactly the same kind of enormous changes over the centuries, from a time when polygamy was practiced in parts of the church, through the use of marriage to achieve various political goals, the long history of our subjugation of women, the issue of remarriage after divorce, and our continuing struggle to come to terms with some understanding of equal partnership within marriage. The “good old days” were not good for anyone – neither the men who had most of the perquisites, nor the women who were subjugated.

Conclusion #3: Our increasing knowledge, understanding, and perspective do change the “contents” of our moral response to God.

Rejoinder: Doesn't that mean that St. Paul may not have gotten homosexuality right?

Given all we know about real people in real relationships, living out their lives with all the marks of the Holy Spirit and in full dedication of their lives together to Jesus Christ, do we even have to ask? Our inherited moral codes regarding homosexual relationships were based on little more than a few verses from the Jewish purity code and the feeling that such behavior was “sick” or “nasty” or “dirty.” Today we have a choice. We can choose to hold on to that inheritance, or we can base our morality in the context of observing the loving, caring, and committed relationships among people we know. Sexual and interpersonal morality should be no different for married heterosexual couples than for partnered same-gender couples; there is behavior that is hurtful and cruel in both, as well as behavior that is loving and life-giving in both. We *can* tell the difference. Really, we can.

“But I Believe in the Faith Once Delivered to the Saints!”

The obvious question is “Which saints?” David Rhoads, in his recent book, *The Challenge of Diversity*, identifies four quite different understandings of Jesus’ teaching about love among the four evangelists and three pretty much mutually exclusive understandings of atonement. The diversity of ritual and ethics and theology was incredibly rich and diverse in the first centuries of the Christian Church. So the question is proper: Which saint? Was it Peter or Paul? Matthew or John? Irenaeus or the author of the Didache? and on and on.

When you get right down to it, “the faith once delivered to the saints” usually translates to “What I wish Jesus had established as an ethic for all time.” However, as noted above, Jesus’ ethics bear little resemblance to what those who nowadays call for “the faith once delivered to the saints” have in mind. The use of the phrase, “the faith once delivered to the saints” can mean only one thing: “Beware! Christian hoax ahead!”

Conclusion #4: You have to squash an enormous diversity of insights and awareness if you want to propose an unchanging Christian morality for all generations. When you do that, the result will be the opposite of a faithful response to the Scriptures as the Word of God.

Rejoinder: But isn't it true that the Bible says certain things are right and certain things are wrong?

It may be argued that, on the whole, we don't pay much attention to very much of anything Biblical writers urge upon us, unless their urgings happen to match our prejudices.

However, in response to the Rejoinder, the Bible doesn't say anything. It is more faithful to say "St. Paul says/teaches that . . ." or "The author of Leviticus says/teaches that . . ." The Bible does not teach that women must have their heads covered in worship; Paul does. Because it is Paul who teaches that, not the Bible itself, we can deal with that requirement in the light of everything else we know. That is also true of other matters. (*Hint, hint!*)

The Episcopal Church has no reason to fear diversity in experience and in faithful response to the loving gifts of God. God did not die shortly after Biblical times. God has not delegated to the Anglican Communion Network or any other group the responsibility to exclude or to impose limits to the elements of Creation eligible for God's blessing! There has been no parting of the clouds with God's voice addressing Martyn Minns or any of the Network's fundamentalist dissidents, crying out: "Narrow the Vision! Narrow the Vision! Punish those who honor my Creation!"

The Proposal

Here is the deal: The Episcopal Church could sacrifice the centrality of our Book of Common Prayer, our reverence for Holy Scripture and its study, our understanding of life as sacramental, our belief in the authority of the laity in the governance of the church, our trust in the vows our clergy make, and our longstanding refusal to countenance a morality which is neither Christian nor moral. Even if we bartered away those topics I have addressed in this series of essays, what would we get in exchange? We would get to revert to the primatial oversight we rejected at the birth of our church – and we would gain the evil authority to proclaim that such people as Michelangelo Buonarroti, Sir John Gielgud, W. H. Auden, Ned Rorem, Lily Tomlin, and thousands upon thousands of men and women who have given their lives for Jesus Christ have, according to St. Paul's teaching and Lambeth 1.10, no place in the Kingdom of God.

That is a proposal we can and must refuse. Our bishops must turn it down for the sake of all that we hold precious.