

What Is The Anglican Communion? What is the Church Of Jesus Christ?

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The majority of the bishops meeting at Lambeth have voted to suspend the Episcopal Church of the United States from being able to vote on decisions made by the Church of the Anglican Communion for three years because of our decision to honor gay marriage as a rite of the Church. The bishops are not the Anglican Communion. They are a body of important leaders within that Communion. What is their understanding of the Anglican Communion that they could even take such a vote? More fundamentally, how do they understand the constitution of the Church of Jesus Christ?

We can discern two very different understandings of the Church as we look at our history over time. One is exclusionary, the other inclusive. Which is more faithful to the Bible?

We have a long and powerful heritage in this country that comes from the particular sect of Puritans that came over on the Mayflower. Prior to the emigration of the Pilgrim, there were in England two groups of Puritans. The one group saw its way to compromising with the Anglican Church in order to continue to serve as pastors in England's churches. The other group would brook no compromise. You were either right or you were wrong. Those in the right have the obligation to divorce themselves from those who are wrong. You either leave the Church that is contaminated with evil to form a new and pure Church, or in order to maintain a pure Church you rid yourself of the evil ones. It is the group that could brook no compromise that left England, going first to Holland and thence to Plymouth, Massachusetts. We can see this view of how to be the Church powerfully at work in our political system today as well as in Churches that exclude people who don't pass their purity test from membership or leadership.

This view of the church is not by any means a view that is peculiar to Americans who have inherited this exclusivist Puritan tradition. It also shows itself in the fact that many of the Anglican bishops at Lambeth were able to vote to suspend the Episcopal Church in the United States from having a vote in the decisions of the Anglican Communion. It is a way of being the Church that leads to a particular way of settling the issues we have with each other and even discerning which issues are critical. This view of the Church has made its way into the way many Americans conceive who we are as a nation, and it has radical consequences for whether we remain the exemplary democracy we claim to be.

Is there an alternative view of the Church, one that is more true to the Bible? That is the question we shall consider in the next section.

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Part Two

In the last section, I described a view of the Church many Americans have inherited from the Pilgrim ancestors who came to American shores because they believed humanity could be divided into those who are good and those who are evil. They saw themselves as good and were unable to compromise with those they viewed as evil. They therefore conceived of the Church as the company of the good, such as themselves, purified of those who were evil.

There is an alternative view of the Church – and of our nation. Its foundation is the view of humanity that permeates the entire Bible, the view that none of us is pure. We are all a mixture of purity and impurity. Quoting from several Old Testament texts, Paul declares: “There is no one just, not one All have gone astray; all alike are worthless; there is not one who does good,[there is not] even one.” (Romans 3:10-11)

How do we build a Church on this foundation? By recognizing that our only hope is what God has done in Christ. It is God’s action that brings the Church together. And what God brings together is a company of sinners. We are not sinners only. We are, through the grace of God, on our way to being transformed into the image of Christ. But there is no distinction to be made between the good and the bad. There is no single action or thought that qualifies this person or this body of Christians as pure and another as impure.

Not only the Churches of the Anglican Communion are divided over the issue of gay marriage. The entire Christian Church is divided over this issue. And it is not an Either/Or sort of division. When you actually talk with people, there is a spectrum of views, some radical, both others with much nuance. And yet Churches split over this issue, making it into a Either/Or choice, each choice labeling themselves as good and those making the other choice as evil.

But one has to ask, Why is this the “make or break” issue in regard to who is good and who is bad? Was this the “make or break” issue for Jesus? That is the question we shall consider in next week’s issue.

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Part Three

What is the Church? Is it the company of the righteous, purified of those who are unrighteous? If so, what is the “make or break” issue that determines who is pure and who impure? Our stand on various sexual issues is the standard of purity in many churches today. Was this Jesus’ standard? Did he have a standard, and if he did, who of us meets his standard?

Issues concerning our sexuality are without a doubt of central importance for our life. We are indelibly sexual beings. Jesus articulates a very clear standard for human sexual relationships: no divorce. But beginning with Matthew and then Paul and then the Church as a whole in developing the concept of annulment, followers of Jesus have found it necessary to make compromises with Jesus’ categorical rejection of divorce practically from the word go. And then there is the question how Jesus treated real people who violated his standard. Remember the story of the women the men were about to stone for adultery in John 8.

But in addition to being sexual creatures, we are also indelibly people who consume the earth’s resources. We are social animals who have to live alongside other people who are very different from us, both near and far. So how are we doing as consumers and as social beings? Jesus spent far more time talking about how those who consume more treat those who have barely enough to keep them alive. He spent far more time building bridges with the tax collectors, who were traitors and collaborators with the enemy and getting kickback from those who wanted to purify the society of such people. He also treated women as on an equal footing with men, resulting in a very short-lived elevation of women to positions of leadership in the early Church, a position to which they have still not been re-admitted in large portions of the Anglican Communion. (Pay close attention to the position of the women Paul greets in Romans 16!) When Jesus did speak about purity explicitly, he included sexual impurities, but his list was far more extensive: “evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness” (Mark 7:21-22). Why are all these other concerns of Jesus not “make or break” issues in the efforts of Christians to purify the community? Where is the “pure Church” when it comes to these issues?

“There is no one just, not one All have gone astray; all alike are worthless; there is not one who does good,[there is not] even one.” When we, both as the Church of Jesus Christ and as a nation that champions democracy, lose sight of this truth about ourselves, we lose sight of our own responsibility for the sicknesses that infect our world and that Jesus came to heal, beginning in us. It is so much easier to see the speck in the eye of the other than the log in our own eye. (Matthew 7:3) Many people find it difficult if not repulsive to imagine that they are as sinful as the worst person they know. But until we are able to confess that, we cannot avail ourselves of

the healing that Jesus brings us and through us to our world. And we cannot join Jesus in his healing work, because healing must begin with me.