



Why the Battle? Different God, Different Gospel

Module Six – The Church

The Rev. Dr. Kendall Harmon

A famous college student poster once read “Jesus Christ, yes The Church:No” and there is not a person here who cannot identify in part with what is being said by him. As one of my friends says jokingly—“I love the church, it is just the people I struggle with.”

Even if we admit the church is full of flawed people, we must not fall into the trap that many Christians have of saying we love the Lord of the Church while constantly criticizing and carping about the very same church of the Lord’s.

To cite but three images from Holy Scripture, the church is known as the army of God, the body of Christ, and the bride of Christ, which in the words of the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, he has purchased with his own blood. Not to care about the church is like an American citizen saying “I love my country but I don’t care what happens with our armed forces.” Or it is like you or me saying we care about ourselves but not our bodies. Not to care for the church is like a husband who says of his wife “I love her very much I just do not want to give her anything.” It is not an option which is available to us.

So how shall we understand the church Christ calls us to love?

First, as it says in the creed, we understand the church to be catholic with a small c. When the creed uses the term catholic here it means universal, pertaining to the whole.

As Anglicans we unpack this in two ways. First, we understand ourselves to be chronologically catholic through time. That is, we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. We believe there is such a thing as a history of the Holy Spirit’s work with the church which must be deeply respected. The way we live out that respect is through the so-called Vincentian Canon-- “Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est” (That faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all). When a consensus of the faithful has believed something to be Christian truth, we have to take that with the utmost seriousness.

A second way we understand the church to be catholic is in the geographical sense, around the whole world. The Anglican Communion today represents some 70-80 million Anglicans throughout over 160 countries. We are in a unique moment in history because of the telecommunications revolution to understand this more completely than any who have lived before us—we truly do know we live in a global village. The consensus of what they all believe in a central sense also must be respected.

The church catholic--both in the historical and geographical sense--has a clear teaching on the matter of Christian sexual behavior, namely that there are only two states of existence, single and married, and that the only proper context for the celebration of sexual intimacy is between a man and a woman who are married to each other. Therefore, the unequivocal standard is abstinence if you are single and faithfulness to your spouse if you are married. Sexual behavior of any other sort is simply out of bounds.

We all know how beautiful games can be, but one of the key things for games to work properly is boundaries. Whereas there can be much freedom and creativity on the field of play, whether in soccer or American football or other sports, the boundaries have to be respected.

Christians believe the same thing about the good gift of sexual intimacy. It is like fire in a fireplace—in its proper place it can be beautiful and powerful and comforting, among many other things. But fire outside a fireplace can be dangerous.

When the Anglican Church of Canada in 2002 and the Episcopal Church in 2003 approved of sexual behavior outside the covenant of marriage, they violated the clear teaching of the church catholic.

Now as Anglicans we go further in our specific understanding of the church and say that we are Reformed catholics, which has implications for how we structure our common life. It revolves around who gets to make decisions and how those decisions are made. The Anglican Church has always understood itself historically as a middle ground between Roman Catholicism on the one hand and free Church Protestantism on the other.

As such our way of making decisions differs from theirs. Free Church Protestantism tends to place a great deal of authority in the individual parish for making decisions, and has as a dangerous tendency to fall into individualism when it is at its worst. Roman Catholicism, by contrast, places a great deal of teaching authority in the hierarchy and in particular in something called the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Roman Catholicism has a danger of falling into authoritarianism when it is at its worst.

Anglicanism's way of making decisions is conciliar, that is, it is focused on councils, whether vestries, or diocesan conventions, or General Conventions, or Lambeth meetings, or Primates meetings. The Anglican theologian Richard Hooker believed that the purpose of councils was to promote peace and stability, and argued their authority was related to their conformity to the teaching of Holy Scripture and the decisions of previous councils, as well as to the degree to which their decisions were more widely accepted over time.

For a conciliar church, the more important the decision, the more widely you consult. The question then becomes what does it mean for Anglicans to consult with our international family. To answer this we need to provide a bit of historical background to the arising of the modern Anglican Communion in its most contemporary form.

The Church in England dates all the way back to the earliest first few centuries, but the historical Anglican Church began to emerge with the Elizabethan settlement in the latter 16th century. From this time onwards, the early years of Anglicanism overlapped with the British Commonwealth, held together by the Church of England and the Archbishop of Canterbury, the first among equals.

As the Commonwealth continued to expand in the Victorian period in the 19th century, more and more different commonwealth countries had their own particular culturally appropriate form of Anglican worship and practice, and it was suggested that it may be useful to invite all the Bishops of the Communion to Lambeth at the behest of the Archbishop of Canterbury once every ten years. This became known as the Lambeth conference, which had its first gathering in 1867, and this proved a second means by which Anglicans throughout the world developed their interrelationships and maintained some cohesion.

The real emergence of the worldwide Anglican Communion only began after the second World War, and was a consequence of Anglicanism's own success. A Roman Catholic commentator on Lambeth 1958 said: "The Lambeth Conference was composed of 310 Anglican bishops from 46 countries. It is today far wider in its reach than it used to be. It may be said to represent the second most important religious communion in English-speaking and English-ruling or ex-English-ruling parts of the world."

Now that was in 1958; and the author estimated the numerical strength of the Communion at that time at around 40 million. As of the 1990s, however, the Anglican Communion had significantly over 70 million members in over 160 countries worldwide--it had nearly doubled in roughly a generation.

It is worth pausing and considering just how explosive the growth among Anglicans, especially in the global South, was in the period beginning about 2 ½ decades after WW2. According to David Barrett's invaluable resource the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, consider some examples of the growth of individual Anglican provinces from 1970 to 2000:

--The Anglican Church of Kenya grew from 582,600 in 1970 to 3.1 million in 2000

--the Anglican Church in Nigeria grew from 2.914 million in 1970 to 18 million in 2000

--The Anglican Church in Rwanda grew from 161,899 in 1970 to 700,000 in 2000

--The Anglican Church in the Sudan grew from 300,000 in 1970 to 2.2 million in 2000

--The Anglican Church in Uganda grew from 1.281 million in 1970 to 8.580 million in 2000

These are only some of the illustrations, but they are sufficient to show that more was needed to help hold the worldwide Anglican family together in a better fashion as we moved toward the latter half of the 20th century. Two more so called instruments of Communion, means by which Anglicans sought to live in mutual dependence and

responsibility, arose in this time. One of these was the Anglican Consultative Council, formed following a resolution of Lambeth 1968; they came into being in 1969 and had their first meeting in Kenya in 1971. It consists of laypeople, priests and bishops from the various provinces throughout the Anglican world. The other of these was Primates' meetings, which only began in the late 1970's. These were meetings of the head leaders (in some cases archbishops, in others Presiding Bishops, etc.) of all the global Anglican provinces, and initially these leaders met every two or three years, again at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

This brief history shows the evolution of the so-called four instruments of Anglican Communion: The Archbishop of Canterbury, The Lambeth Conference, the Primates meeting, and the Anglican Consultative Council. In the current situation, the question then becomes what did these four instruments say in terms of their import on the actions of the North American churches in 2002 and 2003?

First, the 1998 Lambeth Conference – in Resolution 1.10: (a) “upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage”; (b) “commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptized, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ”; (c) “while rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation.”

Second, – The Anglican Consultative Council on September 15-26, 2002 –called upon “dioceses and individual bishops not to undertake unilateral actions or adopt policies which would strain our communion with one another without reference to their provincial authorities; and provincial authorities to have in mind the impact of their decisions within the wider Communion.”

Third, the primates meeting Communique from May 2003 - ‘The question of public rites for the blessing of same sex unions is still a cause of potentially divisive controversy. The Archbishop of Canterbury spoke for us all when he said that it is through liturgy that we express what we believe, and that there is no theological consensus about same sex unions. Therefore, we as a body cannot support the authorisation of such rites.’

Fourth, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams on his appointment, in a letter to the Primates on July 23, 2002: "the Lambeth resolution of 1998 declares clearly what is the mind of the overwhelming majority in the Communion, and what the Communion will and will not approve or authorise. I accept that any individual diocese or even province that officially overturns or repudiates this resolution poses a substantial problem for the sacramental unity of the Communion".

As if all this wasn't enough on October 15-16, 2003 – a special [second in 2003] Primates Meeting at Lambeth voted to “re-affirm our common understanding of the centrality and authority of Scripture”; “re-affirm the resolutions made...at the Lambeth

Conference in 1998 on issues of human sexuality as having moral force and commanding the respect of the Communion”; and speaking of the provinces state that “none has authority unilaterally to substitute an alternative teaching.”

Then on October 18, 2003 John Humphrys (JH), a BBC radio broadcaster, interviewed the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams (RW), about the outcome of the Primates’ Meeting and its implications....

JH: What about your own personal position here. Do you believe that Canon Robinson should become a bishop?

RW: No I don't because I believe that on a major issue of this kind the Church has to make a decision together and one of the things that has emerged most painfully and with such difficulty in the last couple of days in our conversations is the large number - the very, very large number - of Anglican provinces who feel that, quite simply, a decision has been made which commits them or involves them in some way and yet in which they have had no part at all. And many of these are people who come from rather small and struggling churches to whom it matters quite a lot that they have a voice in a decision which, like it or not, affects them quite directly.

These examples are more than sufficient to make clear that all four Anglican Instruments of Communion told the Episcopal Church no, and we arrogantly and unilaterally went ahead and sanctioned out of bounds behavior in a Christian leader anyway,

It is imperative that we understand tonight that if we love the church and respect the church, such actions are not possible. They are not sanctioned by the historical church, nor by the global church, and nor by our own international Anglican family.

We want to stay genuinely historical global Anglicans. The only way to do this is to repudiate what has occurred and be part of the Anglican Church of North America which stands exactly in that place.