

A Response from Thomas W. Gillespie*

Only because my own communion is engaged in the same struggle identified by the title of this report do I have the temerity to accept the invitation to offer a comment on its contents to my Episcopal sisters and brothers. Full disclosure, however. I write as a Presbyterian minister who has publicly advocated for over three decades now the position represented in the paper by the traditionalists. While I share with the authors of both persuasions the hope that a resolution of the disagreement may be achieved that does not result in institutional divisions in our respective churches, it will come as no surprise that I am unpersuaded by the argument of the liberals. Among my reasons for this are its faulty biblical exegesis and its highly questionable use of the scientific evidence regarding homosexual orientation. But my deeper concern is the change of venue of the ecclesial debate to an arena where scriptural and theological arguments are no longer considered relevant. Let me explain.

The genius of the liberal proposal (in addition to its prose) is evident in (1) its definition of marriage as both a “discipline” and a “means of grace” modeled on “the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church” (1979 *BCP*, 423) that leads to “sanctification,” and (2) its expansion of this “sacrament” to include same-sex couples. It is a bold proposal that many will find persuasive simply because of its non-judgmental attitude toward homosexuality per se and its redemptive promise of “holiness” in marriage for all couples regardless of gender. No doubt this favorable reception will be influenced more by what the traditionalists identify as our current cultural predilection for “fairness, compassion, and individual rights” than by biblical/theological convictions.

The two sides of the debate have distinct attitudes toward culture. The liberals argue that culture is a social-historical arena in which the Spirit pursues the mission of God (*missio Dei*) in movements for freedom and justice. The task of the church, on this view, is

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to bear witness to Christ by advocating and supporting those social causes, such as same-sex unions, that represent “the justice of God.” The traditionalists are rightly suspicious of social movements and moods, pointing out that not every call for change is of God. To their credit, both sides agree that criteria are needed for discerning what is and is not of the Spirit in our ever-developing social world.

The liberal paper appeals to the surprising work of the Spirit attested in Acts 10 and 15 regarding the inclusion of Gentiles into the, at the time, strictly Jewish church. Peter’s vision in the night and subsequent preaching of the gospel to Gentiles in the house of Cornelius at Joppa that resulted in their belief and reception of the Spirit, as well as Paul’s report of his successful Gentile mission to the Jewish council in Jerusalem, are offered as analogies, if not parallels, to the current debate over the status of same-sex relationships in the church. The claim is that in these texts “the Spirit has contrived with social change” to warrant the conclusion, analogous to that of the Jerusalem council, “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us’ that they should marry (Acts 15:28).” The basis of this inference is explicitly acknowledged to be “the witness of same-sex couples” abetted by “pastoral practice” and “the sacrament of marriage.” Put simply, the argument is based on an appeal to *human experience*—the recognized “authority” in our current cultural arena.

The notion of same-sex couples being graced and sanctified in marriage by God sounds quite compelling, even romantic. But saying something does not make it so. The liberals are making a promise that only the Spirit can keep if the Spirit wills. The very scriptures offered as testimony to the Spirit’s work, however, contravene this expectation. It should be noted at the outset that Peter does not go to Joppa in response to a “social change” movement, but in obedience to a revelation from God. Further, given belief in the gospel and the reception of the Spirit by the Gentiles, he does confess that “God shows no partiality,” but infers from this that “in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is *right* (Greek: *dikaioσύνη*) is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34–35, emphasis added). Similarly, the letter from the Jerusalem council to Gentile believers included as a condition of acceptance their abstinence from “unchastity” (Greek: *porneias*). In other words, Gentiles are acceptable to God but characteristic Gentile behavior is not. Ephesians 4 makes the point clear: “Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live”

(vs. 17). The list that follows typifying behavior to be avoided includes “licentiousness” and the practice of “every kind of impurity” (vs. 19). What the biblical texts attest to is indeed God’s acceptance in grace of Gentiles into the church while calling for the moral transformation of all so accepted. Applied to our current debate, the point is that people of homosexual orientation are called by grace through the gospel into the church and, like all other believers, to a transformed life.

The liberal paper dismisses on alleged scientific grounds the possibility as well as the desirability of changing homosexual orientation, and that would be the subject of another critical comment. But for this one I would simply contend that the very biblical texts appealed to as divine authorization of same-sex marriage offer no such sanction. The traditionalists speak of “the modern Western mentality” that treats nature as something we humans are free to impose our own will, values, and meaning upon. My fear is that the liberal proposal seeks to do the same with God, attributing to the Creator their own views of sexuality and making promises in behalf of the Redeemer that are vacuous. Yet I also fear that our respective churches have become so “enculturated” that an ecclesial decision will be made on the basis of a secularized “public opinion.” To my mind the traditionalists are in danger of winning the biblical/theological battle and losing the cultural war.

