

Preface

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This group of academics was convened to offer a distinctively theological approach to the controversy before us. We acknowledged that our church's doctrinal foundations are the catholic creeds and we gave special attention to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed that we usually recite at the celebration of the Eucharist. Further, we agreed that most of the doctrinal concerns raised by the controversy over same-sexuality cluster under the third article of the creed on the identity and activities of the Holy Spirit. These include the sanctification of believers ("the Lord, the giver of life), the authority of Scripture ("has spoken through the Prophets"), ecclesiology ("one holy catholic and apostolic Church"), and sacramentology ("one baptism for the forgiveness of sins").

Because the sexuality controversy is multilayered, we realized that we could not address every aspect of it and organized our efforts around marriage. Marriage rather than same-sex blessings came to the fore as the practice is becoming legal in both the United States and other countries. As of this writing, same-sex marriage is legal in Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and the District of Columbia, and in Argentina, Canada, Belgium, Iceland, Mexico City, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, and Sweden. Same-sex domestic partnerships and civil unions are legal in other states and countries as well. The question of whether marriage is between two consenting persons or between a man and a woman is now before the church as well.

We realize that the perspectives offered in our papers may not reflect the thinking of all Episcopalians. Our assignment, however, was not to express the mind of the church but to offer theological

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terms for discussing the matter at issue and to look ahead at some implications of various courses of action that might be taken. We are not offering our work as a way forward. Nor are we offering a compromise position that might put the dispute behind us so that we move ahead together. We are offering two interpretations of doctrinal and scriptural faithfulness that fundamentally disagree. What we are doing—and on this we do agree—is offering a word to the Episcopal Church, that it and the Communion may grapple a bit more theologically with important doctrinal and hermeneutical questions embedded in the debates and their practical consequences. Our work means to stimulate an ever-sharper grasp of the theological—especially the doctrinal—issues at stake.

Our original hope was to offer a wide variety of theological positions on the question before us. That was not feasible as the eight scholars gravitated to two affinity groups and a single position emerged from each group. This does not mean that all members concur with the position presented by their own group, but splintering into factions within factions would have hampered the collegiality we strove to maintain.

Akin to the question of the number of positions offered is the nomenclature used. As is the case with many controversial topics, language is a sensitive issue here. As with many delicate topics, sensitivities heighten and shift over time. Somewhat reluctantly, we settled on the terms “traditional” and “liberal” to designate the two positions taken here, although they are misleading. At times, we have used the term “conservative” as a synonym for traditionalists, and “revisionist,” “progressive,” and “expansionist” as synonyms for liberal. The designation “liberal” for the position supporting homosexual marriage is especially misleading, as it is quite traditional in its own novel way. Among ourselves, we have been comfortable with all these terms. Realizing, however, that there will be readers with various sensitivities, there may be no nomenclature that will appeal universally and we decided to use commonly used labels. Still, we have used several of these terms as they help us cultivate the self-reflective spirit and openness at which our work aims even when we could not achieve that goal ourselves.

Within our doctrinal framework forged by the third article of the Nicene Creed, we came upon some surprises. Some of us came to the table thinking that the disagreement is about sexual ethics or

perhaps pastoral care or social justice. Some came with a practical approach; contextual changes in the culture mean that some theological accommodation should be made by the church to adapt to changing circumstances. Some came thinking that the central issue is hermeneutical—what guidelines do we follow for interpreting Scripture? Our penetrating conversations pressed everyone to refine their ways of stating their own position to attend better to the nuances and intent of other positions.

The theological orientation of our work pressed us to subordinate all these presuppositions to the authority of the “deposit of faith” that sustains the church in obedience to its Lord. By no means does this mean that the deposit of faith is inured to change or safe from error. It does insist, however, that the terms on which change is considered be consonant with Scripture and the historic faith of the church. To put it sharply, we agreed that theology based on Scripture and creed sets the terms for considering extra-theological perspectives that bear on the matters at hand. Neither modern science, high-minded values, nor personal experience can authorize changes in Christian doctrine and practice apart from historically agreed upon creedal categories. That is, to write theologically, we agreed that Scripture and received doctrine are the terms within which current questions of faith and practice are to be addressed.

Christian belief and practice are not like a Kandinsky painting that can be thought of as right side up no matter which direction one views it from. To put this in terms of the three-legged Anglican stool, if Scripture and tradition constitute the deposit of faith, reason’s contribution—which includes philosophy, science, culture, and experience—will be reviewed within the purview of the other two legs of the stool in the process of reasoned theological argumentation.

As the reader will see, we did not arrive at two symmetrical documents with each side addressing common questions. This is partly because each affinity group came at the issue with different purposes, needs, and perceptions of audience. The work of the traditionalists was overtaken by events in the midst of their work in the summer of 2009. The decisions of the Episcopal Church’s General Convention relating to this issue, and the approval of ordination of clergy living in same-sex relationships by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America pressed the conservatives to frame their work in terms of the precise context in which they now found themselves.

Their document not only frames the global context within which they locate themselves but also lays forth their position through doctrinal development, hermeneutics, natural law, and the scientific discussion regarding homosexuality. They argue both that Scripture does not support homosexual but only heterosexual marriage and that support for homosexual marriage accedes to the surrounding culture rather than enabling the church to witness the truth of Christ to the culture.

The liberal document takes a quite different approach. It is a bold and fresh doctrinal proposal to expand the scope of marriage to include same-sex couples. The argument is built around the marriage ceremony of the *Book of Common Prayer*. It is that marriage is a means of sanctification of life and that homosexual persons need the holiness that sacramental marriage provides no less than heterosexual persons do. The church should not withhold from them oversight of sexual holiness but use the means of grace offered in its marriage rites to support them in their life in Christ.

It argues equally strongly that gay marriage is not a concession to contemporary sexual laxity but on the contrary calls homosexual persons to the same sexual standards that heterosexual marriage does and so opposes sexual casualness that is rampant in the culture. Further, it argues that marriage is an act of self-donation and because in marriage one gives oneself for the well-being of another, married people participate in the atoning work of the cross of Christ in a particular bodily and social way. One gives one's body in marriage as Christ gave his body for the church.

We think that despite all the words already spoken on this issue our contributions advance the debate by hearing from both sides, by presenting theological arguments, and by offering positions that have not had a wide hearing in the church. We hope that they will be received in the spirit in which they are being offered.

At the same time, since not all Episcopalians turn first to theology when considering controversial issues, it may be warranted to illustrate the nature of theological argumentation with some examples. Even though not all of these surface in the documents that follow, most did arise in our frank conversations. Indeed, the fact that practice has changed and that liturgical rites are being proposed before considering these and other questions is one reason that our theological approach is warranted.

One example is the unity of the church. Whether the ordination and marriage of homosexual persons is a church-dividing issue was not one that we sought to address but one that we finally could not avoid. There are two ways of understanding “church-dividing.” On a practical level, it is clear that this controversy is causing division in both the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. The creation of the Anglican Mission in America (now Anglican Mission) in 2000 under the auspices of the Province of Rwanda and of the Anglican Church in North America, which was formalized in 2009, attests to *de facto* divisions among us.

Normatively speaking, however, the question is whether the movement of the Episcopal Church away from some classic doctrines and practices—for example, ordaining non-celibate persons (ordaining homosexual persons is not a new practice) and now the possibility of sacramental marriage of homosexual persons to one another—warrants ecclesial division on doctrinal grounds. Do these changes constitute a doctrinal and/or canonical challenge to the integrity of the faith sufficient to warrant division on theological grounds? What doctrines are involved in such changes? Certainly sacraments are. Although neither ordination nor marriage is a dominical sacrament, both are scripturally grounded. The sacramental as well as practical consequences of change need to be considered to ascertain clearly what is at stake ecclesially, pneumatologically, and sacramentally in new interpretations of ordination and marriage.

Perhaps more discussion on what constitutes a church-dividing issue is warranted. Are all doctrines of equal weight or are primary doctrines (trinity and incarnation, for example) to be distinguished from secondary ones? If so, are sacraments primary or secondary doctrines? Further, are all sacraments of equal weight or do dominical sacraments take precedence over others?

Another example of a theological question would consider the work of the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit—who, Scripture says, will lead the church into all the truth (John 16:13)—and not our own inclination is leading the church in this new direction, as the argument for gay marriage maintains, are those who demure being disobedient by remaining faithful to the tradition that they believe to be true, and that is now rendered, if not explicitly declared to be erroneous? This is a significant question raised by our liturgy for holy matrimony. The liturgical blessing of the newly married couple (1979 *BCP*, 430) has

an epiclesis; it is God the Holy Spirit who blesses the couple, not the priest.

A further illustration involves the sacrament of holy orders. Bishops promise to “guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church” (1979 *BCP*, 518), and priests and deacons promise to obey their bishop. What are the implications of changing doctrine and practice for those promises? Would clergy who refuse to endorse changes be censured, and what about priests who disagree with their bishop’s position in either direction?

It would be ironic if a move to include the disenfranchised effectively disenfranchised others. What looks to some like “leaving the church” is to others being left by the church.

In sum, this offering responds to the Archbishop of Canterbury’s call for the Episcopal Church to treat the issue theologically, and we interpreted that call as inviting doctrinal analysis that is first faithful to the creed, the foundation of the church’s unity, and that interprets Scripture within that framework. Some readers may be unfamiliar with theological terms that generally presuppose formal theological training. We, however, are executing the charge given to us in the framework in which most of us have been professionally trained. Indeed, we all agree that our professional scholarly and theological training is to be used in service to the church and not only for the sake of advancing knowledge for its own sake. We invite a patient reading of our work that it may be a constructive contribution to what is now a decades-long controversy. In terms of theological controversies that is not very long, but to those caught in it it can seem an eternity.

Finally, on a personal level, I am deeply grateful for the cooperation and good-spiritedness of panel members as we pursued this difficult task together. Although he pressed me into this project, I am especially indebted to Bishop Parsley, who held our collective hand, prodded us as needed, and pored over every word we produced. His intellectual integrity, dedication to the church, generosity of spirit, and deep sense of fairness were the strength on which we leaned all the way through.