

A Response from Kevin Ward*

It was interesting to read these essays by the two “affinity” groups, each advocating, with remarkable clarity and commitment, such contrasting positions on same-sex relationships, and yet each doing so from deeply held Christian conviction. It seems that the group as a whole, from an early stage, decided frankly to recognize the profound gulf between the two positions dividing the church. In establishing the two affinity groups it was hoped to avoid the temptation of reaching a consensus in which no one believed. Instead we have two fascinating papers whose differences of perspectives and whose *modi operandi* are starkly delineated. On the one hand the “traditionalists” rehearse, in careful and measured ways, what might be described as the classic position on the incompatibility of homosexual practice and Christian discipleship. It is a plea for the church to pronounce clearly and definitively against same-sex relations. I detected a certain weariness of tone in the exposition, an exasperation that Christians should even be discussing things which the Bible and tradition, universally, authoritatively, and definitively, have condemned. The “liberal” essay, by contrast, is enthusiastic and optimistic; there is a sense of exciting theological exploration, a pilgrimage into a brave new world. The traditionalists acknowledge the seductive power of this vision, but warn against becoming captivated by its Siren sounds.

The format of the offering almost demands that the reader choose between the two presentations and take sides. So I had better come clean. I certainly feel more comfortable with the liberal perspective (though as will become clear that too is problematic for me in the end). The theological vistas opened up by their virtuoso discussion of St. Paul are exhilarating to me. I warm to a theological analysis which frees us from the tyrannies of exclusive understandings of “gender

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complementarity” and “the cult of fertility.” The exegesis of the marriage between Christ and the church compellingly relativizes gender differences. It facilitates the encounter between men and women in mutual equity and respect, and opens the way for an appropriate expression of same-sex love. It provides a context in which desire can seek fulfillment in life-giving and life-sustaining forms. Like Luther’s discovery of justification by faith, a way is opened by which that basic longing of all human beings for love can find holy expression. Kierkegaard notes, in *Works of Love*, that God’s first address to Adam are the words “It is not good for the man [human] to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). And that is as true for gay people as for heterosexuals. Moreover, homosexuals are sinners, but they are not sinners because they are homosexuals. The homosexual is justified precisely as a sinner, just like everyone else. But for long centuries, lesbian and gay people have been taught, and have often internally felt, that somehow their “sin” was excluded from the realm of grace.

What I find rather more disturbing in the liberal presentation is the statement, rather casually thrown out, “Here is what we propose: traditionalists should not break table-fellowship. Same-sex couples must avoid unchastity; they must marry” (p. 62). This is meant, I guess, to be a contemporary riff on the accord reached at the Council of Jerusalem between Gentile and Jewish Christians. While I wholeheartedly endorse the liberal conviction that Christians ought not, and do not need, to break communion over the issue of same-sex relations, I am alarmed by the insistence that same-sex partners should marry, if by that is meant that all such relationships should find their legitimacy primarily in a sacramental blessing by the church. Partly this may be a Protestant sensibility about the secular/civil nature of marriage. Marriage (and, by extension, same-sex partnerships) is a human agreement between the two individuals involved. The couple appropriately seek the recognition of the wider community. They are also encouraged to seek the church’s blessing, as mediator of God’s approval. But the church’s blessing is not essential to the compact itself. I don’t know whether the Episcopal Church insists on its (heterosexual) communicant members being married in church, or whether it also accepts civil rites of marriage as equivalent. And what about those who choose to live together without making any binding legal promises? Are they welcome as full communicant members of the church? In practice, the Church of England seems to have all but abandoned this kind of regulatory discipline for its lay members, if not

for its ministers. This may well be regretted by many Anglicans, including both liberals and traditionalists on this panel. But the reality is that, however much the church may encourage people to submit to such a discipline, it is no longer possible to enforce submission, and problematic to devise sanctions for the nonconformists. In my view, it is better to hold out marriage (both heterosexual and homosexual) as a gracious gift rather than as a requirement of full participation in the Christian community. It is a goal of sanctification rather than its condition. Where I would agree with the liberals is that the church should encourage same-sex couples to consider the discipline of a lifelong committed relationship as a fulfillment of God's calling. I feel ambiguous about whether such a commitment should be called "marriage" or something else, though I do not agree with the traditionalists when they rule out same-sex "marriage" as an impossibility.

Although the two affinity groups interpret being countercultural in very different ways, they are united in asserting that the church should evidence a countercultural perspective in the face of secular society. The traditionalists interpret the very move toward the legitimization of homosexual relations as a sign of the church's apostasy in the face of secular values. The liberals disagree, but are equally anxious about the inappropriate sexualization of culture. These are legitimate concerns. But I am not convinced that understanding "church" and "culture" as polarities really helps the argument. The church has, in fact, been deeply implicated in the commodification of modern culture and needs to repent. Even the church's much vaunted "family values" have corrosive characteristics, as gay Christians have long experienced. Kafka's lament—"this little family has claws"—resonates in the experience of many lesbian and gay people. On the other hand, at times the church has been at the vanguard of moves to assert a humane civic response to lesbian and gay people in the face precisely of secular society's deep and persistent homophobia. In England, the church played a surprisingly positive role in the moves to decriminalize homosexuality in the 1960s, despite a fairly hostile press and public.

I think the traditionalist group is rather too complacent about its own relations with the global South. They stigmatize liberals for colonial attitudes, particularly their insensitivity in driving through innovations unacceptable to the South. But the group seems rather uncritical of the relationships of traditionalists with the South. Conservative Christians can be every bit as patronizing as liberals in their enthusiasm for allying a supposedly "traditionalist" Southern

Christianity to their cause. Money flows from conservative coffers as it does from the liberals, and it also has strings attached. The outrage of Southern Anglicans Christians *can* become an American culture war by proxy. It is disingenuous to deny this possibility, even if, in the end, one denies that it is happening (on the grounds, for example, that American traditionalists are simply allying with a preexisting conservatism or faithfulness to biblical values held by Anglicans in the South).

True, Anglican churches in Africa have always offered a clear and uncompromising teaching about marriage. But they have had to accept the reality that a large proportion of their membership finds it difficult to conform to this teaching. In Africa, polygamy remains widespread, even among Anglicans. Even more pervasive are casual relations among Christians, and forms of marriage which fall short of Christian ideals. I am very aware that the arrogant liberal accusation against African Christians that they are thereby hypocrites is totally misplaced. High standards of Christian marriage are indeed upheld by church authorities, and the fact that their members do not conform is not in itself an argument against those standards. But the conservative assumption that African Christians are highly conservative in their understandings of marriage is an oversimplification of the subtlety and variety of African theological and pastoral attitudes to sex and marriage. African Anglicans have to live with the messy reality that a diverse spectrum of sexual partnerships exists within the Christian community. Irresponsible and destructive forms of relationships are strongly discouraged, and rightly so. But stable and mutually beneficial relationships often have community esteem and are widely and tacitly accepted, even if they are not officially endorsed by the church. It would be perfectly possible to envisage this kind of hospitality and generosity being extended to gay relationships, if it were not for the insistent and obsessive intrusion of Western debates on homosexuality. As the Canadian scholar Marc Epprecht has shown, there are a host of well-established and deeply acculturated forms of same-sex relationships throughout Africa. But both the affirmation of a gay identity and homophobia are of recent creation. In the Christian world these realities have been obscured by the extension of Western debates to Africa, and by the particular vituperative nature of the Anglican crisis. As Joseph Massud has shown for the Middle East, the terms of Western discourse on homosexuality have had profound negative effects on

traditional patterns of same-sex relationships in the Muslim world. The Anglican crisis has had devastating consequences for tiny emergent gay and lesbian movements in Africa. Homosexuals have been demonized in ways which some African Christians have characterized as reminiscent of ethnic cleansing and genocide.

It is good to have the two positions elaborated so lucidly by the two affinity groups in their report to the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church. The next step must surely be to ask the question of how, given these irreconcilable views, the two groups can live together, indeed whether it is worth trying to do so. I certainly want this to happen, and I am optimistic that in the long term it will happen. If I have a suggestion, it is to learn from the innate pragmatism and hospitality of African Christianity as it existed before the present world Anglican crisis. But I realize that many, on both sides, will consider that to be a willful and somewhat unrealistic reading of African Christianity! However, to find some way of living together seems essential for the future of the Anglican Communion.

