

What is a legitimate development of Anglican doctrine concerning Homosexuality?

Written for

The Faith, Worship and Ministry Committee of the General Synod

By

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Before we can answer the question of whether blessing same sex unions is a legitimate development of Anglican doctrine, we need to answer the prior question of what is the Anglican standard for legitimate doctrinal development? Failure to be clear about this has been a stumbling block. Notice that the question is about the development of *Anglican* doctrine. It does not ask for an answer that will be acceptable to all Christians, let alone all people. It seeks an answer that is faithful to the international Anglican Communion, of which the Anglican Church of Canada is only a part. I will argue in this paper that certain prior issues need to be settled before we can know what is a legitimate Anglican answer. Having discussed how problematic is the question as posed, I will explore the option of The Anglican Church of Canada going it alone to answer the question for ourselves.

Who speaks for the Anglican Communion?

The Convocation (Synod) of the Church of England approved Thirty-nine Articles of Faith in 1563, and in 1571 all clergy were required to subscribe to them. It also approved a Book of Common Prayer and Ordinal in 1662, the last of a series of major revisions of the order of service until the 20th century. Its content is an important definition of Anglican doctrine. It assumes an understanding of marriage and sexual relations that supports heterosexual marriage as normal and right. It does not consider the possibility that God might bless other options (except celibacy.) It assumes a certain negative attitude towards homosexual behaviour without proving that this is the only

possible valid position to take. This declaration of standards was sufficient as long as civil and ecclesiastical authority both enforced it.

While the British Empire, and with it the Church of England, was expanding around the world, differences from England theory and practice began to develop. The House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church of the United States of America proposed a set of standards for defining what is an Anglican Church in 1886. The Canadian Church was a prime mover in persuading the Lambeth Conference of 1888 to adopt very similar “Lambeth Quadrilateral.” (Resolution 11) resolved

That, in the opinion of this Conference, the following Articles supply a basis on which approach may be by God's blessing made towards Home Reunion:

(a) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as "containing all things necessary to salvation," and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.

(b) The Apostles' Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.

(c) The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself--Baptism and the Supper of the Lord--ministered with unfailing use of Christ's words of Institution, and of the elements ordained by Him.

(d) The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church.

Its tone is mild, even differential, and it does not address the issue of doctrinal development per se, but it does give us an idea of how such development might be validated.

- The development must be harmonisable with the Holy Scriptures, including the Old Testament with all its abominations upon all men who lie with other men “as with a woman” and upon all who eat shellfish. It does not specify any principles of interpretation.
- No doctrine can claim to be essential to Christian faith or necessary for salvation any teaching that represents an addition to the Apostles and Nicene Creeds.
- No doctrinal development can claim legitimacy if it any way detracts from the administration of the two core sacraments.

- Any development must be approved by the episcopate, allowing that the way Episcopal authority is administered may vary between times and places.

Up to recent times, this has served as an adequate framework for embracing a wide variety of theologies and moralities in the world-wide Anglican Communion. It has not proven adequate to produce an Anglican census about the moral status of homosexual relationships.

- Understandings of the nature of the authority of the Bible, especially of the Pentateuchal laws vary widely. Researches in History and palaeontology have undermined respect for the Old Testament in which much objection to homosexuality is rooted. Anglicans, being generally well educated, are pressed to reconcile their beliefs with “reason,” a key concept of post-renaissance western society. The church has always distinguished between laws which were meant to apply only to the times they were written for and laws which are binding for all times, though there has never been universal agreement on which is which.
- As The Nicene and Apostle’s Creeds say nothing on the subject of sexuality, this provision precludes making any doctrine of sexuality a salvation issue.
- Anglican clergy are not in the habit of enquiring about the participants’ sex lives in connection with either of the major sacraments.
- Bishops are in theory independent in their own diocese, but they represent the universality of the church. They are concerned to maintain a harmony and unanimity on important subjects. The concern for unity applies also at the national and international levels. Diocesan Bishops do not agree on the moral issues of homoeroticism, in their home countries, and certainly not internationally.

Rationalism and Religious Authority

The context for declaration of the Lambeth Quadrilateral was not only the 19th century world-wide mission of Christianity, but also the growth of belief in the findings of “reason” or “science.” The relationship between Christian religion and science in

Canada the U.S.A. and Europe (including Britain.) a long and complex one. For most of the public it took the shape of a battle between a more rigid adherence to scripture as the standard of truth and a modified understanding of the authority of the Bible that incorporates lessons learned from “reason” or “science.”

In the world of euro-american civilisation, neither the authority of Scripture nor that of church tradition holds sway only over more than a small portion of the population. The prevailing standard is “science,” that is the application of reason to observable facts. Reason is thought to be a self-evident thing, something that all right thinking, “rational” adults can agree upon, beyond a “reasonable doubt,” given that they have all the relevant “facts.” Reason is the defence of the rights and dignity of the individual human being. Every sane adult human being is assumed to have it, and by it all are able to agree on what is true. Reason rescues objective truth from emotional bias. For centuries, reason usually saw homosexuality as a perversion of right and rational sexual behaviour, the product of poor upbringing. In the past few decades, psychological research has tended to reverse this opinion.

Following Scripture often is understood as adherence to divinely dictated statements and commandments that can be fully and truly understood without reference to historical context. Scriptural teachings have been understood to be timeless and objective. In the past century this simplistic viewpoint has been strongly challenged and modified by a “critical” approach that applies the canons of the natural and human sciences to the text. Critical studies have taken destructive turn, reducing the Bible, especially the Old Testament, to an historical curiosity. When acting constructively, they have disclosed surprising depths in the meaning of Scripture.

“Conservative” theological positions often extol married love, presumed to involve one man and one woman. The idea that homosexual passion and caring could be the basis of a lasting union does not occur to them. Anglican Christianity was exported from Europe and North America by missionaries who brought with them the teachings of their denominations and a tendency to favour “Biblical truth” rather than “reason.” The daughter churches have embraced Biblical authority with a simplicity and enthusiasm

seldom matched in the North / Western world. Their understanding of the Christian and Anglican faith had no difficulty meshing with the prevailing rejection of homoeroticism by the indigenous cultures.

Today, the younger churches of Asia and Africa are often appalled by the departure of the “mother churches” from the positions that they promoted in the 19th century. They see that American and Canadian churches as having surrendered to the secularist, self-indulgent, selfish, materialistic culture in which they live. The gay controversy has consolidated the resistance to “modernising” trends, with the “traditionalists” searching for a standard to replace the open ended posture of Lambeth 1888. Some have placed a renewed stress on the standards of 1662 and 1563, vesting them with a degree of finality.

Hitherto the national churches have managed to make decisions for themselves on the assumption that they are only deciding issues of local significance, that do not involve a threat to the unity of the Communion. Ten years ago the actions of two parts of the Anglican Communion provoked a strongly negative reaction from the rest of the Communion, and raised the question of where the authority governing sexual practice lies. A segment of the communion has tried to invest some combination of the Lambeth Conference, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Council of Primates with that authority. Canterbury has assiduously refused to accept this crown and has structured Lambeth 2008 to avoid it. Certain members of The Council of Primates, mostly in central Africa, have shown a desire impose their wishes upon the entire Communion, but they have had little success in this drive.

Work on the wording of an “Anglican Covenant” is progressing. Assuming that the working group does, in the next few years, produce text that gains the assent of most national Anglican bodies, we will have a touchstone for answering the question as posed.

Should Canada go it Alone?

General Synod has another option than wrestling with the question of Anglican Doctrine.. It can claim the right of an independent national church to define doctrine within the parameters of its own constitution. To do so would have consequences for our

relationships with the rest of the Anglican Communion, especially if we chose to answer the question affirmatively, of course, but perhaps we should take this risk. More importantly, we would need to define doctrine within the terms of our constitution. That constitution specifies that General Synod has jurisdiction over (6.1) “The definition of the doctrines of the Church in harmony with the Solemn declaration adopted by this Synod. (in 1893.)”

The Solemn Declaration repeats the parameters of the Lambeth Quadrilateral adding the following conditions

- “We (are and desire to remain) in full communion with the Church of England throughout the world.” united in the headship of Christ in the Church Universal.
- “the Holy and Divine Spirit Who is give to them that believe to guide them into all truth.”
- Determined by the help of God to hold and maintain the Doctrine, Sacraments and Discipline of Christ as the lord has commended in His holy Word, and as the Church of England hath received and set forth in the (the Prayer Book and Ordinal of 1661 and the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion; and to transmit the same unimpaired to our posterity.” The Ordinal adds little to what I have already noted is found in the BCP 1662 and the Thirty-nine Articles. (It does add a promise to behave oneself in according to these doctrines and the example of Jesus Christ.)

These conditions are legally binding upon all Clergy of the Anglican Church of Canada and upon the General Synod as a body. All of these national parameters presume an understanding of marriage and sexual relations that supports hetero-sexual marriage as normal and right. It does not consider the possibility that God might bless other options (except celebacy.) Under this limitation, it a difficult to argue that any form of blessing of a homosexual union can be approved, but not impossible. These standards assume a certain negative attitude towards homosexual behaviour without proving that this is the only possible valid position to take.

True to its heritage in the national church of England, Canadian Anglicans have tended to assume that the norms of British Canadianism are harmonious with the

teachings of Anglican Christianity. They are only starting to wake up to the possibility that the western ideal of freedom to develop one's individuality might not lead to the same conclusions as the solemn Declaration of 1893. The more we become aware of what those standards say, the more likely we will want to rephrase out adherence to Anglican traditions. We have a growing awareness of the multiplicity of Christian and other groups that make up this nation. Some Canadian Anglicans may be trying to avoid awareness of our minority status in Canada by glossing over our biblical and historical objections to homosexual behaviour because we want to appear to unequivocally support individual rights, as they are understood in North American society? We also stand confused by the presence of strong Christian traditions that do not share these libertarian ideals. Can we affirm them while rejecting their approaches to gender issues?

Conclusion

The lack of anything like a consensus amongst Anglican about how the Scriptures are to be read is an Achilles heel making us vulnerable to the ebb and flow of western rationalism on our left and naïve fundamentalism on our right. Particularly, defence of homoeroticism has relied more on civil libertarianism than on Christian principles. It has tended to "explain away" homo-adverse Bible passages rather than discern divine messages that open the door for deeper understandings more friendly to homosexuality. The St. Andrew's Draft of the proposed Anglican Covenant contains the following encouraging clauses, which I quote at the end of this paper.

A mutually respectful dialogue may open the way for the conflicting viewpoints about homosexuality to find a deeper answer more harmonious with the Word of God. The Anglican Covenant Working Group appears to be drawing strength in its efforts to develop a covenantal structure which attracts the bulk of the Communion. This structure needs to include an approach to Bible and Reason that is acceptable to those who sign on to it. The St. Andrew's draft, criticised for its juridical appendix, does define the context for the development of doctrine (and other activities) in a pattern that builds on the Lambeth Quadrilateral. Its attempt to incorporate (and harmonise, not balance) the roles

of Scripture and Reason shows promise of something that the Canadian Church can sign on to.

Lambeth 2008 has adjourned without any resolution of the tension brought to the fore by Lambeth 1998. The participants in the debate are listening to each other better, but are still far apart in their understandings of the moral status of homosexuality, the development of doctrine and the nature of Biblical authority. The proposed Anglican Covenant is still a work in progress. General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada has asked for a yes or no answer to one part of the conundrum. It has not prescribed a deadline for the Committee to come up with such a yes or no. Synod should consider whether it wishes to take a stand before proposed covenantal structure is in place. Do we make a decision and take the chance that we are leading ourselves in a different direction from the rest of the communion?