

Commission on the Marriage Canon
The Anglican Church of Canada
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“If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...” (Philippians 2:1-5)

To begin, a question: Why is it that in situations of conflict Christians often find themselves accomplices in war, rather than agents of peace? I offer this answer: It is because we find it difficult to distance ourselves from our selves and our own culture and so we echo its reigning opinions and mimic its practices. When North American Christians can so easily kill their brothers and sisters in, for example, Iraq, we fail to keep the vision of God’s future alive. In times of war, we need our brothers and sisters on the other side to pull us out of the enclosure of our own culture and its own peculiar set of prejudices so that we can hear afresh the “one Word of God.” In this way, and only in this way, we might once again become salt to a world ravaged by strife.¹

To my brothers and sisters in the Anglican Church of Canada, and to those who have been selected to serve the church by getting to work on the Commission on the Marriage Canon: I urge you not to go forward with the proposed changes to Canon XXI, “to allow the marriage of same-sex couples in the same way as opposite-sex couples.” There are, to be sure, theological, historical, sociological, and Biblical reasons not to do so. Some of these, which centre on procreation and the rearing of children, the condemnation of same-sex intercourse in Scripture and Tradition, and the Scriptural and theological significance of created difference (including male-female differentiation) as a part of the good ordering of creation and a sign of Christ and the church, are ones by which I am personally persuaded. But I will leave it to others to articulate them for your study. In this case, my primary purpose is to urge you to maintain our traditional canon on the basis of *love*. Namely, love for our sisters and brothers in Christ not only throughout the world but also throughout time, that great cloud of witnesses! I urge you on the basis of *Christ’s* own love (“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ...”): that is, the laying down of one’s self for the sake of others.

It is clear that Canadian society at large has moved on in this matter: two people of the same sex, our civil law now affirms, ought to be able to get married in the same way as two people of the opposite sex. Some in the Anglican Church of Canada regard our arriving late to the party as a terrible tragedy, “Why is the church always behind the times?!” they cry out. Much has been

¹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p.54.

written about the relationship between church and culture but my question is this: To whom do Christians owe their allegiance? I should hope that the obvious answer is, to the risen and living Jesus.

There is a less obvious though no less important answer, however: Christians owe their allegiance to *one another*. You and I are bound to Christ and because we are bound to Christ we are *bound* to one another. The vast majority of the church (Anglican or otherwise) is for the traditional understanding of marriage as currently outlined in Canon XXI. It is important to realize, though, that this majority is not some powerful bastion of rich entrenched interests; just the opposite. Those we are bound to are the poor church of the majority world, not only materially deprived but often politically beleaguered. We are also bound to our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters as well, a reality that requires compassionate, loving, and truthful, pastoral care. But we must not rush ahead in these matters and stress further the tensions between wealthy Western churches and our poor brothers and sisters that compose the majority of our own Anglican Communion. “But that’s restrictive and confining!” some would say. Yes, it is. But there is no other way to be Christian because this is the way that God in Christ has loved us—by giving Himself, all of Himself, entirely to us. And God’s self-sacrificial love in Christ bears fruit—*us*. The church grows out of and is sustained by this very love, and we are called to participate in it as well: “be of the same mind, having the same love...” May we be so willing as to sacrifice our conscience on this matter, at this time, for the good of the whole church.

It is no secret that the creation of liturgical rites for the blessing of same-sex unions in the Diocese of New Westminster and the consecration as bishop of Gene Robinson in the Diocese of New Hampshire were catalysts for significant stress and fracturing within our Anglican Communion. In hindsight, were these the sort of self-sacrificially loving acts by which we regard our global sisters and brothers in Christ as better than ourselves? I wouldn’t want to be the one charged with making that case. When you make an agreement with someone—as bishops did at Lambeth 1998, for example—we are not then free to go our own way. This destroys trust and disrupts the entire processes necessary for discerning our future.

The blood of Christ that binds us together as brothers and sisters is greater and more precious than the blood, the language, the customs, political allegiances, or economic interests that may separate us. We belong to Christ and as such we belong to one another. For the sake of love, the Anglican Church of Canada must reject, therefore, the false doctrine that would have us give allegiance to the culture and the nation which we inhabit above the commitment to our brothers and sisters from other cultures and nations, servants of the one Jesus Christ, our common Lord.

Thus, I would urge the Anglican Church of Canada and the Commission on the Marriage Canon to listen to the voices of our sisters and brothers in the Anglican Communion and to keep Canon XXI as is. Perhaps we have become unaware of the ways in which our culture has subverted our faith and have thus lost a place from which to judge our own culture. This may be of no fault of our own, but in order to maintain our allegiance to Jesus Christ, we need to nurture our love and commitment to the multicultural community of Anglicans (not to mention other Christian

churches) throughout the world. May we, in love, refuse to abandon that which we together with our brothers and sisters discerned, until we together discern another way forward.

We cannot be committed to Christ apart from a commitment to the community of Christ. Yet, by changing the marriage canon, the Anglican Church of Canada would be declaring itself sufficient to itself and to its own culture. We should resist this and be open to all other churches and on this very important matter we would do well to slow down and listen to our brothers and sisters whom we so desperately need. This would require sacrifice indeed, because this is love.

Grace and peace,

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