The Righter Trial and Christian Doctrine

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This article and another to appear in the next issue of Churchman *represent the author's argument for a heresy conviction in the trial of Episcopal Bishop Walter Righter in 1996. The formal charge or 'presentment', stemming from Bishop Righter's ordination of an avowed non-celibate homosexual man in 1990, was brought in 1995 by ten bishops. Later that year the required 66 additional bishops consented to the holding of a trial. At a pre-trial hearing in December 1995, the Court of nine elected bishop-judges decided to address first the question: 'What constitutes doctrine, particularly as it is binding on what a bishop may or may not teach?' This decision accomplished the hope of the Presenters, who were more interested in establishing the moral doctrine of the Episcopal Church on homosexuality than in pursuing Bishop Righter himself.*

I was invited by the presenting bishops in early 1996 to write a position paper addressed to the doctrinal question. The first article, The Righter Trial and Christian Doctrine, *is my response, only slightly edited. Parts of the article were excerpted in the legal paper for the February hearing. Later it was circulated to all bishops of the Episcopal Church in the USA in a publication entitled* A Time of Trial. *Finally, it appeared in* The Christian Challenge *magazine and circulated in samizdat form through mailings and the worldwide web* (www.episcoplian.org).

In early March, the Court judges asked both parties to address two additional questions about church discipline. It seemed that they were looking for a way to avoid the charge of heresy by distinguishing between doctrine as a matter of theology and morals as a lesser matter of discipline. To counter this apparent move, I wrote the second paper, The Righter Trial and Church Discipline. *Its distinctions between doctrine, morals, and discipline informed the Presenters'* Memorandum on Church Discipline, *to which it was attached as an appendix. Apparently, the judges chose to ignore the paper itself on grounds that it was excluded 'expert testimony'.*

I believe that a careful reading of these articles will bring out most of the crucial theological issues in the Righter Trial. In the 'aftermath', I shall summarize the Opinion of the trial Court and the implications for the

Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion.

Introduction

By now, there are probably few Episcopal Church leaders who have not heard of the upcoming trial of Bishop Walter Righter, and after 27 February 1996, the current trial date, there will be few people in the Church or nation who will not have heard of it. So it seemed important to explain the basic issue at stake in what is destined to be an historic and painful event.

Bishop Righter was charged under Canon IV.1.1(2)(6) with the offence of 'holding and teaching publicly or privately, and advisedly, any doctrine contrary to that held by this Church' and with an 'act that involves a violation of Ordination vows' to conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church.[1] The specific act which led to this charge was his ordaining Barry Stopfel, an openly non-celibate homosexual man, to the diaconate in September 1990.

The Church Court, at its hearing in December 1995, decided to divide the case into two segments. First, it will determine whether Church doctrine prohibits the ordination of a non-celibate homosexual person, living in a sexual relationship. If the Court decides that the Church does have such a doctrine, then it will go on to determine whether Bishop Righter knowingly violated that doctrine.

The aim of this paper is to explain to the Church constituency why it is intellectually defensible and spiritually important to claim that the Church has a doctrine of human sexuality that would exclude a non-celibate homosexual person from ordination.

1 Does the Church Hold Any Doctrine?

The central question which will be argued on 27 February is this: 'Does the Church have a doctrine about human sexuality such as would prohibit the ordination of a non-celibate homosexual person?' Posing this question raises matters of definitions and of stereotypes.

Definitions

Doctrine may be defined as 'communally authoritative teachings regarded as essential to the identity of the Christian community'.[2] As 'communally

1 American *Book of Common Prayer* (1979) p 513. Unless otherwise noted references to the *Book of Common Prayer* will be to this edition.

2 Alister McGrath 'Doctrine and Dogma' *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell 1993) p 112

authoritative', doctrine differs from theology, which is both a broader and narrower term, referring either to the entire field of Christian thought and practice or to the views of an individual thinker. Doctrine, by contrast, is found particularly in the Church's official formularies.

Characteristically, doctrine is received not made, because it is the Church's response to God's unique revelation in Christ – 'the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3). The Preface to the American *Book of Common Prayer* (pp 9-11) makes an important distinction between the 'substance of the faith' (doctrine), which cannot be changed, and secondary matters of church order and worship (discipline), which may be altered. But even in disciplinary matters, change must be made 'by common consent and authority', that is, through the Canons and structures of church government. Thus when candidates for ordination promise to 'be loyal to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of Christ as this Church has received them', the receiving is of two sorts, the one a grateful acknowledgment of the truth of revelation, the other a grateful passing on of a tradition or discipline which is capable of discussion and alteration by due process.

Doctrine includes not only 'theological truths' like the Trinity but also obligatory moral teachings. The joint authority of theological and moral doctrine mirrors the inextricable union of the Great Commandments: to love God and to love one's neighbour. By naming love of God before love of neighbour, the Church attests that good works 'do spring out necessarily of a true and lively faith' as fruit from a good tree. But it is equally true that loving God necessarily includes keeping his commandments. Thus Christ's Great Commission includes both preaching the Gospel to all nations and teaching them to obey his commandments, and St Paul can refer to discipleship as 'the obedience of faith' (Rom 1:5).

Anglicans have always seen doctrine as inextricably bound up with morals. The catechism includes examples of faith (the Creed), morals (the Ten Commandments), and piety (the Lord's Prayer). The question to candidates for ordination – 'Will you pattern your life [and that of your family, or household, or community] in accordance with the teaching of Christ, so that you may be a wholesome example to all people?' (eg *Book of Common Prayer* p 532) – assumes that the Church has a normative moral doctrine based on the specific teaching of Jesus. A bishop in promising to 'teach and exhort with wholesome Doctrine' has clearly been seen as teaching both faith and morals.

Let us now apply the definitions of doctrine and discipline to Bishop Righter's case. According to the discipline of the Church, Bishop Righter was to have inquired beforehand whether the manner of life of the person

he was about to ordain was suitable to the ordained ministry. But the judgment of what constitutes a proper 'manner of life' is a matter of doctrine. Knowing that Mr Stopfel was a non-celibate homosexual man, Bishop Righter made a moral judgment and set a moral precedent. Surely he intended to make a statement by his act and to change the criteria of future ordinations. Certainly those bishops who have subsequently ordained practising homosexuals, including three of the Court judges (!), have made it clear they see his action in just this way. If Bishop Righter's moral judgment contradicted a central and normative teaching of Scripture, which is the conclusion of the following section, neither he personally nor the Church corporately had any authority to act as he did. Even if his action was a matter only of discipline, he had no authority to act to change that discipline unilaterally.

Finally, doctrine, like the light of revelation itself, has a 'Yes' or 'No' character (cf John 3:19-21). One cannot simultaneously serve God and mammon, and any house divided against itself over fundamental doctrine cannot stand. The same is true in matters of morals: there cannot be two opposite ways of following Christ (James 1:7-8; 1 John 1:6; *Didache* 1.1). One cannot simultaneously endorse and condemn adultery or any other moral norm. Thus, while the Church is right to attempt to understand, apply, and even restate its teaching on sexuality in the light of contemporary experience, it must lay down its moral principles as simply right or wrong. If God has created sex for the male-female relationship and has commanded that it be exercised exclusively within the bonds of marriage, then it must follow that other genital relationships are wrong. If Christian doctrine were to permit other couplings, then marital fidelity must be considered optional.

Stereotypes

There are several stereotypes which accompany any serious discussion of Church doctrine. One is the confusion of 'doctrine' and 'dogma' with the pejorative caricatures 'doctrinaire' and 'dogmatism'. This confusion between the real thing and its stereotypical '-ism' reminds one of the old saying that 'tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living'. Surely Dorothy Sayers dispensed with the prejudice against doctrine half a century ago when she asserted that the real options for the Church are 'Creed or Chaos?'[3] Have we not been witnessing just such chaotic effects of dogmatic relativism in Church and society?

Similarly, while 'heresy' is a striking charge, it accurately describes the seriousness with which the Church regards the truth of revelation and the

3 Dorothy L Sayers *Creed or Chaos?* (New York: Harcourt Brace 1949)

pastoral responsibility of guarding the flock (John 10:12). Seeking to avoid the 'spin' that the media would put on the term, the Presenters did not in fact use the word 'heresy' in their documents. (As it turned out, the media consistently referred to the 'heresy trial' of Bishop Righter.) This did not stop their opponents from labelling them 'heresy-hunters'. This kind of casual name-calling is reminiscent of the latitudinarian bishop in hell, depicted in C S Lewis' *The Great Divorce*, who warns that any discussion of error will bring back the Inquisition.

Another current slogan is that the Episcopal Church is a 'communal' or 'pragmatic' entity, not a confessional Church. This may be an interesting private view, but it is contrary to classic Anglicanism. While Anglicans may not be confessional in quite the same sense as Lutherans, they have always operated with doctrinal formularies (otherwise the Lutherans would not have entered into 'interim Eucharistic sharing' with the Episcopal Church). The Church's central confessions are the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, which are recited at major services. Even radicals like Bishop John Shelby Spong retain the creed, though they 'sing it rather than say it'. Similarly, the publication in the Prayer Book of the Athanasian Creed, the Thirty-nine Articles and the Lambeth Quadrilateral witnesses to the continuity of catholic and reformed doctrine in this branch of the Anglican communion.

A church that will never 'just say no' to those who flout its doctrinal and moral foundations is not worthy of the name. Only a shallow compassion would place the anguish of Bishop Righter or Mr Stopfel over the truth of God's revelation in Christ and his Word. Bishop Righter himself appeals to 'justice', but in so doing he begs the question, to borrow a phrase from Alasdair MacIntyre, of 'whose justice, which rationality?' It is not just and not kind to mislead people (and this includes misleading those with homosexual inclinations). In any case, the pain quotient is not unilaterally experienced by Bishop Righter and gay activists. Many clergy and laity have already made the painful and burdensome decision to leave their beloved Episcopal Church out of conscience, and the refusal of the Court to uphold what many see to be the plain sense of Scripture and the Church's teaching will lead to even more heartfelt departures.

2 Biblical Teaching on Sexuality

What, then, are the marks of true doctrine? The first and foremost is its conformity to Scripture.

The Authority of Scripture in Matters of Doctrine

When Bishop Righter was ordained, the Constitution of the Episcopal Church required that every person ordained and consecrated a bishop subscribe, in the presence of the ordaining bishops, to the following

declaration: 'I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation' (1970 Constitution Art VIII p 7). The authorized Prayer Book (1928 *Book of Common Prayer* pp 554-5) asked candidates solemnly to affirm the following questions:

> Are you persuaded that the Holy Scriptures contain all Doctrine required as necessary for eternal salvation through Jesus Christ? And are you determined out of the same Holy Scriptures to instruct the people committed to your charge, and to teach or maintain nothing as necessary for salvation, but that which you shall be persuaded may be concluded and proved from the same?
>
> Are you ready, with all faithful diligence, to banish and drive away from the Church all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God's Word...
>
> Will you diligently exercise such discipline as by the authority of God's Word, and by the order of this Church, is committed to you?

These oaths reflect the primary authority of Scripture within the Church, as expressed in Article XX: 'The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith: And yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another'.[4]

Because of this authoritative role of Scripture in the Church, the question of whether the Bible has a teaching on human sexuality, and homosexuality in particular, is not only relevant but essential. The following survey will demonstrate that the Bible has a clear, consistent, central and normative teaching which affirms marriage and celibacy as God's purpose for human beings, and which rules out homosexual acts as contrary to the will of God in all cases.

Old Testament Teaching: An Overview

The scarcity of references to homosexuality in the Old Testament does not mean that its teaching on the subject is unimportant.[5] On the contrary, it

4 For the relationship between Article XX and the ordination oath, see J Robert Wright 'The Official Position of the Episcopal Church on the Authority of Scripture: Historical Development and Ecumenical Comparison' *The Bible's Authority in Today's Church* F H Borsch ed (Valley Forge Pa: Trinity Press International 1993) pp 43-70; also found in an earlier version in *Anglican Theological Review* 74 1994 pp 348-61 and 478-502.

5 See what Dennis Prager calls 'Judaism's Sexual Revolution' in 'Judaism, Homosexuality and Civilization' *Ultimate Issues* 6/2 April/June 1990 pp 1-24 excerpted in *The Public Interest* Summer 1993 pp 60-83.

shows that these few moral prohibitions and examples were sufficient to make homosexuality an unthinkable option among the people of Israel. While the Old Testament contains many positive images of marriage (even some of polygamy) and of friendship, it does not contain a single example that would encourage the idea of same-sex genital relationships.

Creation

The Creation accounts lay the positive foundation for the biblical view of sexuality. In Genesis 1:26 God makes humankind in his image, male and female. In the second account (Gen 2:18-24) God acknowledges that 'it is not good for the man to be alone', and so he makes out of the man's side a helper 'according to his opposite' (Hebrew). The complementary male and female sexes united as one flesh fulfil God's primal design for the human family: 'Therefore a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one'.[6]

The Men of Sodom

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19) serves as an awful warning of the dangers of violating the Creation order. The demand of the men of Sodom that Lot bring out his visitors 'that we may know them' was triply offensive: to the duty of hospitality, to the distinction between male and female, and to the awesome chasm between the human and the divine (the visitors, though they appeared to be mere men, were in fact angels of God, according to the narrative). The latter offence is not purely a literary device but reflects the conviction that false sexuality is characteristic of false spirituality.

The Law of Moses

The Ten Commandments (Ex 20) also express the connection between sexuality and spirituality in calling for reverence for God in the first commandment ('I am the LORD your God... you shall have no other gods before me') and warning against uncontrolled desire ('You shall not covet your neighbour's wife') in the last. In between these overarching principles, the seventh commandment prohibits adultery and the accompanying Mosaic case law applies this prohibition to related sexual violations. It is in this context that homosexuality is condemned in the Torah as an 'abomination', an offence both to the holiness of God and to his created order (Lev 18:22).

New Testament Teaching: An Overview

The New Testament writers are unanimous in upholding the Old Testament teaching on sexuality. While relaxing the food laws, they repeatedly warn against the connection between false religion and false sexuality, ie sex

6 For a succinct overview of Old Testament texts, see Gordon J Wenham 'Attitudes to Homosexuality in the Old Testament' *Expository Times* 102 1991 pp 359-63.

outside marriage or 'fornication' (see Acts 15:28-9; 1 Cor 5:9-11; Gal 5:19-20; Eph 5:3-5; Col 3:5; Heb 12:16; Rev 2:14-21; 21:8; 22:15). While the apostles give instructions for mixed faith marriages and single, celibate, and widowed persons (eg 1 Cor 7), they make no provision for any kind of sexual arrangements outside marriage. Indeed, they identify same-sex sexual relations as one variety of false sexuality (1 Tim 1:8-11; 2 Pet 2:6-7; Jude 7).

The Teaching of Jesus

Jesus nowhere weakens or loosens the Old Testament teaching about sexuality. In the very passage where Jesus declares obsolete the Mosaic food laws, he reaffirms the moral connection between sin in the human heart and specific actions: '...fornication, theft, murder, adultery...' (Mark 7:18-23). In two respects, Jesus' sexual ethic is more strenuous than that of the Old Testament. He identifies exclusive monogamy as the primal purpose of God in Creation and exclusive celibacy as the only alternative expression of faithful discipleship (Matt 19:3-12).

St Paul on Homosexuality

The two most important passages on homosexuality come from central Epistles of St Paul. In addressing those in the Church at Corinth who had abused their freedom in Christ, he writes:

> Do you not know ... that neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals (passive or active) ... will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:9-11)

With the reference to their being 'washed' in baptism, Paul is most likely reminding his converts of the basic moral instruction they received when they became Christians. Clearly this instruction was considered essential to membership in the Church and the future kingdom of God.

The same tradition of Christian teaching lies behind Paul's well-known argument in Romans 1:18-32 about God's wrath against all human ungodliness and wickedness.[7] He claims that human sin leads characteristically to idolatry and disordered desires in which 'their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men'. Paul's allusions to the sin of Sodom and to the Genesis account in general indicate that he intends

7 For a discussion of Paul's view, see Richard B Hays 'Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1' *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 1986 pp 184-215.

his teaching to be understood in the widest possible context.

Paul's clear focus on Creation, nature, and sexual acts of both men and women indicates that he is not opposing a particular practice, such as paedophilia or prostitution, but the larger disorder of homosexual relations. In other words, homosexual acts are wrong intrinsically, because they violate God's created design for human nature. For this reason, Paul's teaching does not leave an opening to claim that some homosexual acts are good if they meet certain extrinsic criteria, like 'committed' or 'life-long intent'.

Interpreting Biblical Moral Teaching

Some people argue that the specific prohibitions of the Bible need to be interpreted in light of larger Gospel principles, such as love. While this is true, such a method of interpretation must not be employed to contradict other normative teaching in Scripture. Anglicans have, especially from the time of Richard Hooker on, believed that God's revealed will relates to the concrete customs and practices of Christians in the world. Thus it is our conviction that, however challenging sexual discipline may be for homosexuals and heterosexuals alike, such a discipline promotes their ultimate happiness.

Some people urge the analogy that, as the Church has rejected biblical provisions for slavery and treatment of women as property, so also cultural prejudices against homosexuality may be superseded by modern understandings of loving homosexual relationships. This line of argument involves a faulty comparison. The Bible sees slavery as an evil condition which one may endure or, if possible, get free from. Marriage, on the other hand, is originally a good and God-given arrangement which has been corrupted by sin, which a Christian may either abstain from or humanize in a spirit of mutual submission (1 Cor 7:38; Eph 5:21-33). The appropriate analogy in these cases would be to say that freedom in Christ allows homosexuals either to abstain from sex or to seek to be freed and transformed in their sexual desires so as to find fulfilment in marriage.

Summary of Biblical Teaching

The Statement by the House of Bishops of the Church of England gives an adequate summary of biblical teaching:

> There is, therefore, in Scripture an evolving convergence on the ideal of lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual union as the setting intended by God for the proper development of men and women as sexual beings. Sexual activity of any kind outside marriage comes to be seen as sinful, and homosexual practice as especially dishonourable. It is also recognized that God may call some to celibacy for

> particular service in his cause. Only by living within these boundaries are Christians to achieve that holiness which is pleasing to God.[8]

We note that this normative statement of Christian morals bases itself on the clear teaching of the Bible. To change this teaching, one would have to revise or repudiate the 'convergence' of biblical testimony.

3 The Universal Teaching of the Church

Anglicans have affirmed, under the authority of Scripture, the secondary authority of the catholic tradition, 'what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all people'. The affirmation of marriage and abstinent singleness as the only legitimate forms of sexual arrangement is one of the most universally accepted Christian teachings.

The Early and Mediaeval Church

The second generation after the apostles clearly accepted the biblical prohibitions against fornication and homosexuality as part of its 'pattern of sound teaching' (2 Tim 1:13; cf 1 Tim 1:10). The early church did develop one of Jesus' teachings that was foreign to Judaism. That was the possibility and desirability of a person refusing marriage for the sake of the Gospel. Yet at no point did this new option ever include the affirmation of genital acts. Indeed the earliest church rule, the *Didache*, explicitly condemned both paedophilia and homosexuality, and similar admonitions can be found from Church Fathers both East and West. Thus one patristic scholar concludes:

> As in the New Testament, homosexual behavior was not a particularly important issue for the Fathers, but wherever it was mentioned it was condemned. Arguably, there was relatively little mention of homosexuality in Patristic literature because there was no debate on the subject. The position recently argued by John Boswell – that homosexual relationships were acceptable in the church before the twelfth century – does not square with the Patristic sources.[9]

Despite the pressures of assimilating barbarian tribes into the Christian ethic, mediaeval sexual doctrine is of a piece with that of the early church. Another scholar concludes that 'for more than eight centuries the Latin church praised celibacy, acknowledged the goodness of marriage, and

8 *Issues in Human Sexuality: A Statement by the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England, December, 1991* (London: Church House Publishing 1991) p18 (Harrisburg Pa: Morehouse 1992) p 18

9 Joseph Trigg 'Human Sexuality and the Fathers of the Church' *A Wholesome Example: Sexual Morality and the Episcopal Church* Robert W Prichard ed revised edn (Lexington Ky: Bristol Books 1993) p 31

taught that sexual acts outside of marriage were wrong'.[10] Thomas Aquinas, for instance, elaborated the biblical and patristic understanding of homosexuality as being 'against nature' for humans both in their capacity as animals and as rational beings (*Commentary on Romans 1:26*).

The Reformation

For all their joy in rediscovering the Gospel freedom, the Reformers accepted without question the church's sexual teaching and discipline. The Anglican Reformers were particularly concerned to emphasize that 'the works of the moral commandments of God be the very true works of faith'. Positively, they commended marriage as 'an honourable estate', ordained by God for procreation, as a remedy 'to avoid fornication', and 'for the mutual society of husband and wife'. Negatively, they condemned adultery and fornication, which included 'all unlawful use of those parts which be ordained for generation' (*Homilies* 1.11.1).

The great Anglican divine Richard Hooker did not discuss homosexuality directly, since Catholics, Puritans and Anglicans were all agreed that 'unlawful copulation' of all sorts 'doth pollute and dishonour both parties'. It may, however, be inferred that he would have considered homosexuality contrary both to the laws of Scripture and nature, and 'the ancient practice of the Church' (*Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* I.12.1; V.10.1; cf I.10.10).

Contemporary Ecumenical Teaching

Despite recent revisionist proposals by individual theologians and study groups, the official formularies of the various Christian churches have, with two exceptions, restated the classic teaching on sexuality.[11] The Eastern Orthodox have not even discussed the matter because they consider the traditional teaching to be non-negotiable. Likewise, most conservative Evangelicals consider the biblical teaching self-evident and settled for all time.

The Roman Catholic Church in its 1994 *Catechism* (section 2357) has likewise restated its position:

> Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered'. They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity.

10 William Stafford in Prichard 'Sexual Norms in the Medieval Church' *A Wholesome Example: Sexual Morality and the Episcopal Church* Robert W Prichard ed revised edn (Lexington Ky: Bristol Books 1993) p 44

11 For a relatively up-to-date survey, see *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* Jeffrey S Siker ed (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1994) pp 195-208.

> Under no circumstances can they be approved.

Most mainline Protestant churches, despite recent internal debates, possess clear statements of the classic teaching. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America holds that 'this church regards the practice of homosexual erotic behavior as contrary to God's intent for his children' (1980). The Presbyterian Church USA *Statement on the Ordination of Homosexuals* (1991, reaffirmed in 1996) concludes that 'for the church to ordain a self-affirming, practising homosexual person to ministry would be to act in contradiction to its charter and calling in Scripture, setting in motion both within the church and society serious contradictions to the will of Christ'. The United Methodist Church's *Social Principles*, which was reaffirmed in 1996, states that the practice of homosexuality is 'incompatible with Christian teaching'. The Southern Baptist Convention urged its churches and agencies 'not to afford the practice of homosexuality any degree of approval through ordination, employment, or other designations of normal lifestyle'.

Two Church bodies have broken with this universal consensus. The 1991 General Synod of the United Church of Christ 'boldly affirms, celebrates, and affirms the gifts for ministry of lesbian, gay and bisexual persons'. Likewise the United Church of Canada in 1988 passed resolutions that were understood by all parties to sanction the ordination of non-celibate homosexual persons. While these churches may see themselves to be on the cutting edge of a new dispensation of doctrine, the dissension, division, and membership losses caused by these decisions may rather be a sign of doctrine gone awry.

Contemporary Anglican Teaching

While the specific issue of homosexuality has come to the fore only recently, Anglican bodies addressed the matter of the Church's sexual teaching earlier in this century. The 1920 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops stated:

> Recognizing that to live a pure and chaste life before and after marriage is, for both sexes, the unchangeable Christian standard, attainable and attained through the help of the Holy Spirit by men and women of every age, the Conference desires to proclaim the universal obligation of this standard, and its vital importance as an essential condition of human happiness.(Resolution 66)

Again, in 1930, the Lambeth bishops stated that 'illicit and irregular unions... are contrary to the revealed will of God' (Resolution 19). Even after it addressed the concern for homosexual legal rights in 1978 and 1988, the Lambeth Conference went on to reaffirm gladly 'the Christian ideals of faithfulness and chastity both within and outside marriage, and

calls Christians everywhere to seek the grace of Christ to live lives of holiness, discipline, and service in the world...' (Resolution 19 [1978] and Resolution 64 [1988]).

The Church of England began to review the issue of homosexuality as early as 1952. While there have been a number of individuals and groups which have proposed revising the Church's traditional teaching, the bishops themselves reaffirmed that teaching in a 1987 Resolution stating:

> 1 that sexual intercourse is an act of total commitment which belongs properly within a permanent marriage relationship;
>
> 2 that fornication and adultery are sins against this ideal, and are to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion;
>
> 3 that homosexual acts also fall short of this ideal, and are likewise to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion;
>
> 4 that all Christians are called to be exemplary in all spheres of morality, including sexual morality, and that holiness of life is especially required for Christian leaders.

The English bishops followed this Resolution in 1991 with a Statement entitled *Issues in Sexuality* which concludes:

> that homophile orientation and its expression in sexual activity do not constitute a parallel and alternative form of human sexuality as complete within the terms of the created order as the heterosexual. The convergence of Scripture, tradition and reasoned reflection on experience, even including the newly sympathetic and perceptive thinking of our own day, make it impossible for the Church to come with integrity to any other conclusion. Heterosexuality and homosexuality are not equally congruous with the observed order of creation or with the insights of revelation as the Church engages with these in the light of her pastoral ministry.[12]

While the Statement concedes that some homosexuals may choose conscientiously to engage in long-term sexual relationships, it calls clergy and ordinands to uphold the Church's teaching of marriage or abstinence.

Summary

The nearly unanimous consensus on sexuality by the churches over time,

12 *Issues in Human Sexuality: A Statement by the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England, December, 1991* (London: Church House Publishing 1991) p40 (Harrisburg Pa: Morehouse 1992) p 40

space and culture forms the background to what is called 'the Church's traditional teaching'. Thus when contemporary Episcopal statements refer to 'traditional teaching', they should not be taken to suggest that this teaching is antiquated. Indeed it is *impossible* to depart from this moral standard without placing oneself outside the catholicity of the Church.

4 Current Episcopal Doctrine on Human Sexuality

The Episcopal Church began to address the issue of homosexuality twenty years ago. The discussions which have ensued were distinctly pastoral, affirming the status of homosexuals as children of God, noting the difference between homosexual orientation and practice, and advocating full civil rights of homosexuals. At the same time, the Church has remained strikingly consistent in its official teaching. The means of articulating this teaching have been mainly through Resolutions of the House of Bishops and General Convention. Historically, such resolutions on moral matters have been considered binding on its members and clergy, especially when they claim to be an articulation of 'traditional teaching' and interpretation of Prayer Book language about the manner of life of clergy.[13]

Another dynamic may be observed in the Resolutions. In several cases, they have been issued in response to unilateral, pre-emptive ordinations of homosexuals by 'prophetic' bishops, a tactic which has become increasingly used since Bishop Righter's action.

Statements of the Church's Teaching in the 1970s

The 1976 General Convention called for a study of the ordination of homosexual persons to be reported in 1979. In 1977, however, Bishop Paul Moore of New York ordained Ellen Barrett, an avowed lesbian, to the priesthood. Bishop Moore later insisted that the judgment to ordain her was based on her homosexual orientation: 'we were not dealing with a publicly professed practising homosexual' (1979 *Journal of the General Convention* Resolution B-178).

Later in 1977, the House of Bishops responded to the situation in three ways: they adopted a report from their Committee on Theology which concluded that 'the biblical understanding rejects homosexual practice'; they passed a Resolution that 'no Bishop of this Church shall confer Holy Orders in violation of these principles'; and they addressed the Church at large in the now famous 'Port St Lucie' Pastoral Letter:[14]

13 Prichard *A Wholesome Example: Sexual Morality and the Episcopal Church* Robert W Prichard ed revised edn (Lexington Ky: Bristol Books 1993) pp 51-4

14 The Port St Lucie Pastoral Letter is 'now famous' because it promised 'that no members of this Church should be penalized for conscientious objection to, or support of, the ordination of women'. The Port St Lucie conscience clause is likely to be revoked in 1997 by a proposed Canon which would make women's ordination mandatory throughout the Church.

> It is clear from Scripture that the sexual union of man and woman is God's will and that this finds holy expression within the covenant of marriage. Therefore this Church confines its nuptial blessing to the union of male and female. It is likewise clear that in ordination, this Church publicly requires each ordinand to fashion his or her personal life after Christ as an example to the faithful. The bishops, therefore, agree to deny ordination to an advocating and/or practising homosexual person. In each case we must not condone what we believe God wills to redeem. (1979 *Journal* B-226)

The actions of the House of Bishops in 1977 were confirmed by the next General Convention in 1979, which passed a Resolution by large majorities in both Houses. The Resolution stated that homosexual orientation, ie the inclination to desire others of the same sex, did not present a barrier to ordination. It did, however:

> reaffirm the traditional teaching of the Church on marriage, marital fidelity, and sexual chastity as the standard of Christian sexual morality. Candidates for ordination are expected to conform to this standard. Therefore, we believe it is not appropriate for this Church to ordain a practising homosexual, or anyone who is engaged in heterosexual relations outside of marriage. (1979 *Journal* C-88,89)

Twenty bishops dissented from this Resolution, arguing in a 'Statement of Conscience' for the propriety of ordaining non-celibate, even non-monogamous homosexuals.[15] Disputing the claim of the 1979 Resolution to reaffirm biblical doctrine and ecumenical tradition, they later alleged that the level of authority of the 1979 Resolution was only recommendatory and they threatened unilaterally to define new standards of 'judging' ordinands' manner of life in their episcopal practice. Since 1989 they have been acting on this threat.

Statements of the Church's Teaching in the 1980s

In 1988 the polarization heightened. Confirming the English House of Bishops' action of 1987, the General Convention reaffirmed once again 'the Biblical and traditional teaching on chastity and fidelity' and called for further study and dialogue on the subject of human sexuality (1988 *Journal* p 206). This time, twenty-nine bishops dissented, and soon after, in December 1989, Bishop Spong ordained Robert Williams, an avowed, non-celibate, homosexual man to the priesthood.

15 'Even in cases where an ideally stable relationship has not, or has not yet, been achieved, we are conscious of ordained homosexual persons who are wrestling with the Christian implications of their sexuality, and who seek to be responsible, caring and non-exploitative people even in the occasionally more transient relationships which the hostility of our society towards homosexual persons – with its concomitants of furtiveness and clandestinity – makes inevitable.' 1988 *Journal* p 196

Once again the Bishops responded. In February 1990, the Presiding Bishop's Council of Advice reaffirmed yet again the traditional teaching of the church as articulated in 1979. It noted that 'not all members of the church agree with this position, as they did not when the resolution was adopted in 1979. Nevertheless, short of action by the General Convention, it is the stated and authoritative position of the church at this time' (1991 *Journal* pp 501-3). At their meeting in September 1990, the House of Bishops as a whole adopted this statement as their own (1991 *Journal* p 401). Less than two weeks later, Bishop Righter ordained Barry Stopfel.

Statements of the Church's Teaching in the 1990s

The blatant acts of Bishop Righter and, soon thereafter, Bishop Ronald Haines of Washington, forced the 1991 General Convention to try to clarify once again the Church's teaching.

1 Bishop George Hunt, whose Health and Human Affairs Committee had published a controversial report on human sexuality, presented a resolution that in effect would have rejected the 1979 position and approved same-sex blessings and ordination of non-celibate homosexuals. The resolution did not make it to the floor of the Convention.

2 Bishop William Frey proposed a Canon stating: 'All members of this Church shall abstain from genital relationships outside of holy matrimony'. The Canon failed in the House of Deputies and a similarly phrased resolution by Bishop John Howe failed in the House of Bishops, both by narrow margins. Some deputies argued that the Frey Canon was redundant since the 1979 resolution was authoritative as it stood.

3 Finally, the Convention passed a resolution affirming once more that 'the teaching of the Episcopal Church is that physical sexual expression is appropriate only within the life-long monogamous union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind'. It then went on to urge the Church to 'continue to work to reconcile the discontinuity between this teaching and the experience of many members of this body'.

The 1991 Convention adopted a plan for a church-wide sexuality dialogue and authorized a committee of the House of Bishops to prepare a Pastoral Teaching for the 1994 Convention. The resulting proposed document, entitled *Continuing the Dialogue*, was seen by many to undercut the traditional statements on sexuality. Vigorous in-fighting before and during the 1994 Convention led to the production of two new statements, the *Affirmation* of the Church's traditional teaching (signed by

106 bishops) and the *Statement of Koinonia* (signed eventually by 70 bishops), which dissented from that teaching. Although neither of these statements was finally adopted, the Convention did make significant modifications to the *Continuing the Dialogue* report (1994 *Journal* pp 141-2):

1 They demoted it from a pastoral teaching to the level of a 'pastoral study document'.

2 They prefaced the Resolution offering the document to the Church for further dialogue with a reaffirmation of 'the teaching of the church that the normative context of sexual intimacy is lifelong heterosexual, monogamous marriage...'.

3 They amended one guideline, by which the Bishops 'commit themselves to continue in trust and koinonia ordaining only persons we believe to be a wholesome example to their people, according to the standards and norms set forth by the Church's teaching' – ie conform to the traditional teaching. (*Continuing the Dialogue* pp 94f)

The defenders of the Church's traditional teaching had won a nominal victory. The rogue ordinations continued, however, leading to the decision to present Bishop Righter for trial.

Summary
After twenty years of vigorous, often acrimonious, debate over homosexuality, the Episcopal Church is badly divided. The number of dissenting bishops who have ordained homosexuals has increased, as has the number of conservative clergy and congregations who have withdrawn from the Church or withheld funds. Nevertheless, the Church has been quite consistent in its official formularies. The 'traditional teaching' that marriage and celibacy are the only acceptable sexual arrangements for laity and clergy has been repeatedly affirmed in every major statement, even when calling the Church to try to understand the 'discontinuous' experience of contemporary homosexuals. Thus, on paper at least, the Episcopal Church is aligned with the vast body of Christian churches throughout history.

Conclusion

The trial of Bishop Walter Righter, especially in its first phase on 27 February 1996, is not only about the conduct of an individual but is a matter of the doctrine of the Church. The judges must focus on the simple question: *Does the Church have a teaching on sexuality that would exclude*

non-celibate homosexuals from ordination?

The burden of this paper has been to survey the biblical, historical, and contemporary data on that question alone. There are other issues related to the Church's understanding of homosexuality and ministry to homosexuals, but that is not what is at issue in this particular case.

There is overwhelming evidence that the Church universal, and the Episcopal Church in particular, has held and continues to hold the doctrine that 'physical sexual expression is appropriate only within the lifelong monogamous commitment of husband and wife'. The corollary of this moral doctrine is that homosexual practice is contrary to the will of God and incapable of serving as an example to God's people. The fact that the affirmation of marriage and abstinent singleness, rather than the prohibition of homosexuality, has been the dominant note in the Church's doctrine is simply a reminder that wholesome sexual love and disciplined abstinence are part of the Good News of following Jesus Christ.

To put the weight of the evidence in perspective, imagine another assured Christian doctrine, such as that of the Holy Trinity. Would a similar survey of biblical teaching, historic formulas, and contemporary debates be any more conclusive? The doctrine of the Trinity may be more central as a matter of salvation, but sexual doctrine is hardly peripheral. Fidelity in marriage is connected with God's purposes in creation, with the image of God in human nature, and with covenant faithfulness; on the other hand, false sexuality is consistently associated with false spirituality. Therefore it is impossible for orthodox Christians to consider sexual lifestyle an 'indifferent' matter.

There simply is no alternative teaching in Scripture or the Church's tradition from which to legitimize homosexual practice. The doctrinal vacuum of alternatives may explain why recent revisionist proposals have been vague at crucial points. For instance, the United Church of Christ formulary endorses not only homosexuality but also bisexuality and does not specify lifelong intent as a necessary condition for a wholesome example of sexual relationship. Cut loose from the traditional teaching, gay-rights proponents are themselves divided over whether homosexual relationships should mirror the Church's traditional teaching for marriage or revolutionize it.

The Church has a single, normative teaching in matters of sexual morality: that is the conclusion of this paper. Even if one believes that the Church's position is not a matter of basic doctrine and should be changed, it should in all honesty be acknowledged that the traditional teaching has been and still is the official position of the Episcopal Church. The House

of Bishops stated this straightforwardly five years ago:

> Not all members of the church agree with this position, as they did not when the resolution was adopted in 1979. Nevertheless, short of action by the General Convention, it is the stated and authoritative position of the church at this time.

The General Convention has not acted to change the position. If anything, the 1994 Resolution reaffirmed the traditional teaching. The role of the Church Court is to affirm this doctrine as a matter of fact, regardless of the judges' personal opinion of its contemporary value.

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