

New Truths?

Over the last 25 years, the Episcopal Church has gone through a lengthy, and much needed, debate over sexuality. However, some of the debate has not been helpful. Bishop Smalley of Kansas edited a handbook to be used by over 30% of the Episcopal parishes in this country. In it, he stated that the Bible tells us, "The Spirit will lead us into new truth." The full quote of this verse appears on the front of this brochure, and does not say "new" truth, but "all" truth. There are those who believe Bishop Smalley misquoted the verse maliciously, and others who assume he did it because he honestly believes the Spirit will lead us into new truths. That difference is a large part of the debate over the authority of the Bible in the church. For more info on this debate, please see our other brochures.

Here at Church of the Spirit

From the start, we have adopted two core beliefs:

- ▷ God welcomes everyone into a relationship with him. As a church, we will also welcome all people through our doors.
- ▷ God does not accept everything we do, but calls us to live a new spirit-filled life following his Son and his commandments.

The Anglican church (to which we belong) has taught for centuries (and as recently as Lambeth Conference 1998 restated its belief) that God has spoken authoritatively to us in the Bible. The church also believes Holy Scriptures contain "all things necessary to salvation" and are for us as Christians the "rule and ultimate standard" of our faith and practice. Here at Church of the Spirit, we do not seek to change the traditional understanding of the Bible so much as to live with it and understand it in our lives. We believe God gives us the courage and power to live according to his commandments.

Official Teaching of the Anglican Church

In 1998, the Bishops of the Anglican Church from around the world met for the 1998 Lambeth Conference. This conference meets every ten years to review the theology and practice of the church. At that meeting the bishops passed the following resolution (which was supported by a majority of the American bishops). This church:

Lambeth 1998 Resolution I.10

Human Sexuality

- ▷ in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage;
- ▷ recognizes that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these are members of the Church and are seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church, and God's transforming power for the living of their lives and the ordering of relationships. We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptized, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ;
- ▷ while rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialisation and commercialization of sex;
- ▷ cannot advise the blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions.

The other official teachings?

If there's an official teaching of the church, adopted with the permission of the bishops in this country in 1998, why did the church decide to do the opposite in 2003? I had a chance to ask our Convention Delegates "What authority does the action of Lambeth have over the churches in America? And what authority do you have to vote to change Lambeth 1998?" I was told that our General Convention delegates can change any matter of doctrine, faith, or practice by a simple vote. Decisions made by other bishops or other groups do not have any authority over us. So if the American church decided to pass a resolution that said having two spouses was a legal option, it would be our new "gospel truth." A bigger question left unanswered is why our Church thinks that voting settles questions of theology. In the larger community of the Christian church, I believe we need to work toward a consensus, not only with one another, but with the beliefs of those who have gone before us. The traditions of the church have been recognized as a way to keep each age from following its own fads without respect to the beliefs of millions through the centuries. The Bible and our traditions are meant to help us not get carried away with what's new before asking if it's what's true.

—Pastor Roger Schellenberg +

Just another discussion about sexuality?

Well, no. Though the immediate discussion in many denominations these days is about the acceptance of people with alternative life-styles, the deeper discussion behind this focuses on the authority of the Bible. Should modern Christians accept the Biblical views of sexuality, or are those views out-of-date? Since we know more today about genetics and science, about psychology and development, is it appropriate to accept a pre-modern world view that sees any sexual relations outside of a marriage between a man and a woman as sinful?

Three years ago at General Convention, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church opened the conference with these words:

"We have gathered here ... to discern God's desire for this curious yet wonderful household we call the Episcopal Church ..."

"While we all accept the authority of Scripture, we interpret various passages in different ways. And it is extremely dishonoring of the faith of another to dismiss them as not taking the Bible seriously."

– Bishop Frank Griswold

Sounds confusing ... I guess it all depends on what you call "taking the Bible seriously." Does the Bible say what it seems to say or is everything up for reinterpretation? Or is God the same today as he was in the beginning (as the Bible states)?

That's the nature of the debate at this year's Convention. Some take the Bible seriously when it says God is love. They say that loving and accepting others is mandated more than the observance of ancient codes of sexual morality. Others say they take the Bible seriously by following what God has stated as boundaries for healthy relationships.

In our post-modern world, it's common for people to say there are no absolute truths, and that you are free to believe what you want. But is that really true? Or is it just wishful thinking ... And will you stake your soul on your answer?

Who needs a General Convention?

The national legislative body of the Episcopal Church meets once every three years for what's called the General Convention. The convention meets in two groups to discuss a broad agenda that includes national budgets, evangelism, and theology. One group is the House of Bishops, made up of all the bishops from around the country. The second group is the House of Delegates, made up of elected representatives, both clergy and lay people, from every diocese. Together these groups must pass legislation before any changes in the procedures or practices of the national church can affect the member churches within the denomination.

2003

At the 2003 Convention, the most publicized votes centered on General Convention's support of:

- allowing an openly gay man, living in a long-term relationship, to become the Bishop of New Hampshire. To do this, Convention had to state that such a relationship provides a "wholesome example" of the Christian faith.

- permitting each local bishop the option of allowing services to bless gay unions within their jurisdictions.

- disregarding the legislation passed in 1998 by the Lambeth Council, a meeting of all Bishops from around the world, which stated that the Church does not accept that either of these is appropriate for member churches to support.

2006

At the 2006 Convention, the leaders of the Anglican church from around the world have called on the American church to express regret for these actions and to change course by no longer allowing non-celibate gay bishops to be consecrated or to hold public services for blessing gay marriages, as is currently a accepted practice in this country.

The Bible today ... The debate continues

*... revisiting the international
debate on the Bible and
the role of gay bishops ...*

**When the Spirit of truth
comes, he will guide you
into all truth. He will not
be presenting his own
ideas; he will be telling
you what he has heard.**

– John 16:13 NLT



Church of the Spirit

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