

TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH
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THE EPISCOPATE: SERVANTS OR MASTERS?

There is probably no issue more crucial to the life of the Christian churches today than that of finding the appropriate authority for belief and practice. On whose authority do we affirm our basic beliefs? From what authority do we receive the knowledge of the God we worship? On what authority do we determine the moral principles by which we try to live our lives? These questions are being hotly debated in our Episcopal Church and across the entire Anglican Communion. While these debates seem to center around the issue of the legitimacy of same-sex unions and the ordination of gay persons, the way in which the churches are handling this issue ultimately comes back to the question of authority.

As Episcopalians we stand in the Anglican tradition in which the authority of bishops is of prime importance, but their exercise of authority has become deeply troubling to many. We are called an episcopal church, of course, because the word episcopal is Greek for bishop and means overseer, superintendent, or leader of a community.

In Church history, bishops originally were those persons elected to leadership positions by the members of relatively small congregations. From what we can glean from the relatively scanty information about the early Church, bishops were selected for both their spiritual qualities and their pragmatic leadership abilities. Certainly among the former was their quality of being able, as Jesus says this in this morning's Gospel, to feed and tend his sheep. This is clearly a pastoral responsibility.

In a dramatic recapitulation of Peter's three denials of Jesus following his arrest, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. Peter replies 'yes' each time. And then Jesus says, if you love me tend my sheep, feed my lambs. It has been argued that Jesus also intended Peter to be first bishop among other bishops. Jesus says, referring to Peter in the Gospel of Matthew, that on this rock (which is 'petrus' or Peter in Greek) I will build my church. The Roman Catholic tradition has interpreted this passage to mean that Peter and all his successors as bishop of Rome, that is, Popes, are the rock on which the true church is to be built, thus giving primacy of authority to the bishop of Rome. At least in the early centuries of the church, however, this primacy of authority did not connote domination or coercive hierarchical power over the other members of the community. Leadership, or oversight, arose from *service*, often to the point of death. It meant feeding and tending the most vulnerable members of the community. Authority meant the authority of service, of scrupulous attention to the needs of others, especially the most vulnerable. And, as Jesus predicted, that service was undertaken at great risk. Peter's own death was foreshadowed by Jesus' words that someone would fasten a belt around Peter and take him to a place he did not wish to go. And Peter was bound by a belt and crucified upside down in Rome. His brutal death was the price of his episcopal authority.

Later, as the Roman state installed the Christian church as the established church of the Roman empire, the price of authority shifted from death to worldly grandeur: as bishops began to possess not only ecclesiastical but secular powers they often arrogated to themselves the privileges of glory, adulation, and domination. Instead of the Lamb of God, Jesus, being the only one, as the book Revelation says, receiving blessing, honor, glory, and might forever, many bishops began to claim those blessings for

themselves and to exercise a very different kind of authority: the authority to punish, excommunicate, and even to order the secular realm to exterminate the non-believer, the infidel, and the heretic.

And they exercised their hierarchical power over others out of a belief that they had a monopoly on the truth, and that on the basis of that absolute possession of truth they (the bishops alone in isolation from the laity) had the right to determine the doctrines, beliefs, and moral practices to which all other Christians must be subject. This was no longer the authority of service but the authority of domination. And it was based on a deep fear that disagreement, especially from the unruly and uneducated laity, would undercut episcopal power and undermine the truth of the Christian faith. This was an authority built on fear of disobedience, fear of difference, fear that others, less authoritative than they, might have a better or at least an equally valid purchase on the truth.

While the Anglican Communion does not have an authority like that of the Pope, some of its contemporary bishops (though by no means a majority) have increasingly come to believe that they must exercise a form of hierarchical authority to clamp down on various forms of divergence from what they believe to be the certain, absolute, and unquestioned truth about such matters as homosexuality and the authority of the Bible. The bishops of some of the various national provinces in which Episcopal churches exist have essentially bypassed any mutual consultation with the laity and priests of their churches and have tried to arrogate to themselves the authority to determine what is acceptable belief and practice for all Anglicans.

Now whatever one may think about the appropriate Biblical authority by which they determine their position on homosexuality, clearly one group of people whom they are not serving in humility and openness are their gay, lesbian, and transgendered brothers and sisters. They are also attempting to exercise authority in a way that the Anglican Communion has never historically recognized. That communion recognizes and honors the great diversity among its member churches, provided that that diversity does not promote hostility and hatred toward other members of the Communion.

Our Anglican tradition has always been open to a wide diversity of belief and practice. The only serious restriction on that openness is an abiding commitment to God's revelation of himself through the incarnation of Jesus and God's triune existence as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. But many of the critics of this openness are now seeking to exercise a form of coercive episcopal authority, not to serve the multifarious and diverse members and views found in the Communion as a whole, but instead to impose on everyone else a narrow view of what counts as orthodox thought, and especially restrictive morality. (It is interesting to note that sexual ethics appears nowhere in the creedal statements of the first major councils of the church at which doctrinal issues were hashed out). But adherence to a particular view of sexual morality has now become the litmus test for many bishops of what ought to count as true orthodoxy.

But the most insidious result of this unAnglican exercise of authority has been the neglect of the *really* pressing moral questions of our time. If we take God's revelation in Jesus seriously, then we should be doing the ministry Jesus called all of us, including the bishops, to engage in: the ministry of justice for the oppressed, binding up the wounds of the victims of war, AIDS, economic oppression, and other forms of suffering, especially those which are humanly inflicted such as the horrific massacre earlier this week at Virginia Tech.

While some bishops worry themselves sick wondering if two persons of the same sex might actually be in a mutually loving relationship and having sex as an expression of that love, other persons are dying of neglect, hunger, poverty, and injustice. If authority is to be rightly exercised, it should be in the service of *these* people, not in the service of an authoritarian exercise of episcopal power which bypasses the living experience of real persons, most of whom do not enjoy the privileges of the purple. It's time for those bishops inclined to authoritarianism to return to the vision of Jesus for Peter: feed my sheep, tend my lambs.

AMEN

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