

**MORTAL QUESTIONS
OR
GOD'S INTERROGATION OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

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Convention of the Diocese of Northwest Texas
October 28, 2006

I

First, I would like to thank Bishop Ohl for this invitation to speak at your convention. Second accept my thanks, all of you, for having me. I bring you greetings from the faculty, staff and students of the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest. I know that a number of the clergy here were formed at that institution. So let me say also that, though I speak only as an interim Dean, things go well on Rathervue Place. We will have a new Dean selected shortly, and he or she will begin a new chapter in the history of that institution come the new academic year. I have every reason to believe that this history will prove to be one of the most important and indeed brilliant in the history of your seminary.

I have not come here, however, to speak of the Seminary of the Southwest! I have come to address the most important issue now faced by our church. When your Bishop asked me to speak, I asked what he wanted me to talk about. He answered without hesitation that he wanted me to talk about the unity of the church. I can certainly understand why. What we now know as The Episcopal Church (TEC) could within a few months fragment and become different from anything we have known before. Our struggles over the ethics of sex and other even more important matters (most significantly the person and work of Christ) are quite literally tearing us apart.

I have not come here to pronounce on these matters. Neither have I come to offer a solution to all our woes for I do not have one. I have come simply to speak of what is at issue in these conflicts; and to suggest that the

way ahead for us does not reside in the victory of one party or the other but in learning to inhabit a new sort of social space—a new environment or ethos in which our divisions can be addressed in a manner that is worthy of Christ. Unity is as good a word as any to describe that ethos; and though it may seem odd to say so, unity is not the end product of a successful attempt to address our problems. Unity is in fact the precondition for even beginning to address them in a Christian manner.

I am fully aware that this statement is more than a little unexpected. It may also seem quite nonsensical. Nevertheless, I will stick by it and simply hope that by the end of these remarks I will not appear daft. I propose to prove my sanity by asking of you an exercise in creative imagination. Imagine God looking down on our struggles and asking questions like these. “You know perfectly well that the last prayer of my Son before his agony was that you all be one. Why do you think that desire lay so close to his heart? And while we are at it, if unity is so important both to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, what do you think the unity for which the Son prayed to the Father in the Spirit looks like? And again, while we are on the subject, do you remember anything about the way in which I taught you to maintain unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace so that it is apparent that you are a people who indeed share one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all?”

I cannot imagine, given the central importance unity seems to hold in the mind and purpose of God, that God is indifferent to our struggles; and I cannot imagine that he is not through our very agony interrogating us—putting to us questions like these. Why is unity so important to me? What does the unity I propose look like? How are you to go about procuring and maintaining this unity? Let us, like the prophets, imagine ourselves in God’s courtroom. Let us imagine God as a prosecutor. And let us search for answers to the questions he puts to us that might be acceptable to him.

II

You already have a good idea of the answer I believe God wants to the first question, namely, why is unity so important? I tried to address that question in the sermon on Ephesians I preached last evening. Nevertheless, because the issue is so important, let me state briefly the answer contained in this remarkable letter. The deep purpose of God in history is to unite all things in Christ Jesus, things in heaven, things on earth and things under the earth. This purpose was revealed and put into effect through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of his Son. The place on earth where this purpose may be seen and so made known both to the peoples of the earth and the powers of the heavens is the common life of the church. God's particular dwelling place on earth is no longer a geographical locale—not even Zion. His particular dwelling place is wherever the body of his son is present. Here, in God's assembly, the ecclesia, God's purpose for the creation is both present and visible. Here is the temple of the Lord to which all the peoples of the earth and the powers of the heavens will be drawn.

These are the reasons we Christians are to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. These are the reasons we are to remember always that we are defined as a people in this phrase—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. These are reasons that lie deeper than our need to quiet things down in our parishes, dioceses and provinces. These are reasons that have to do with what C. S. Lewis might call “the deep magic.”

But we have heard this song before, and we are apt to listen to it only as mood music playing far in the background of our real and active life as Christians. In this real and bustling life, other songs with different lyrics now drown out the melody we are supposed to listen to—the melody that is supposed to incorporate the many little musical phrases that float about looking for a home within a larger score.

Forgive the rather extended metaphor. Put more simply and directly, God's major theme of unity is now being drowned out by two others that have become more popular with us. One is played by the left wing of our church and the other by the right wing. The phrase hummed by the left wing has lyrics that are all about justice. The one hummed by the right is all about truth.

In non-metaphorical terms let me explain what I mean. The issue about sexual ethics that now so divides us is presented by progressive voices as being a justice issue. In this view, God's chief business on earth is justice—justice understood first of all as inclusion and equal treatment.

Thus, to deny a person place or office in the church is to stand against the central message of the gospel—usually summed up by a passage from the 4th chapter of St. Luke’s Gospel. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” (Lk. 4:18-19)

Those who take a more “traditional” or “orthodox” stance respond, “au contraire.” The issue is not one of justice but one of truth. They hold that the progressive proposal for reform in fact represents a departure from catholic truth and practice, and as such cannot possibly be a matter of justice. These traditionalist or orthodox voices support their position also by quotations from Holy Scripture and (further) from the long and unbroken tradition of the church.

Now here we have a genuine stand-off, and I see no way out of the stalemate until both justice and truth are relocated as issues within the common life of a people who are eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace and who hold it a matter of first importance to be known as a people with one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

Here we come to the primary point of this address, and in what follows I will try to explain what I mean as best I can. If we reflect upon the progressive position, I suspect that none of us believes giving others their due (i.e., giving them justice) is an unimportant matter. I suspect that most of us, probably all of us, believe that God cares that there be justice upon the earth. I suspect that all of us believe that God wills that we do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. But justice has to do with having a right, and having a right is precisely the issue. What is a right and how are we to come by it? Do we have a right to be included in the church on terms we determine ourselves? Do we have a right to office in the church simply because we feel called to it? Does the church have the right to deny a person place or office because of sexual practice or some other disqualifier? Or, on an even more fundamental level, are rights things that come to us simply by virtue of the fact that we are. Are they in some sense natural to us? Or are rights real and binding only within a community of people who recognize and grant them?

My point is simply this. To declare a right is not the same thing as establishing that one has such a right. Whether they be natural or socially granted, rights are effectively located only within a community that recognizes and enforces them. And how for Christians is such recognition to

come about? One way is that of democratic pluralism—we vote and the winners get the rights. That’s what we often do at conventions like this one. The problem, however, is that, despite claims that the results of the vote give voice to the Holy Spirit, the victory leaves behind divisions not generally associated with the Spirit’s presence. Within a democratic polity, these divisions are an acceptable price to pay for a more over-arching stability. But can the same thing be said of a people whose defining characteristic is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all? Can the same thing be said of a people whose “raison d’etre” is to be the place upon earth where God’s plan to unify all things in Christ Jesus is visible and effective? Is the calling of this people to address their divisions by voting and then declaring a victory for God? Or is it to address their divisions within a more fundamental calling, namely to be in one place with one mind? Is their calling not, in fact, to seek determinations of justice from within a community whose eagerness for unity is the precondition for making such judgments in a faithful manner? And can these determinations be made faithfully when they result from the efforts of political caucuses that have victory as their only goal?

The point becomes even clearer if we address the question of truth. Those of a more traditional frame of mind have met the political efforts of progressives with political efforts of their own. But they have also met them with calls for “orthodoxy” defined in the first instance as confessional agreement. Justice, they contend, cannot be known apart from truth; and it is precisely truth (often expressed as biblical truth) that is said to be absent from the progressive position. Once again, however, a serious difficulty appears. Truth, like justice, requires time to apprehend. Truth, like justice, requires accountability to the critics of its standard account. Like justice, the apprehension of truth is a communal enterprise. Indeed, orthodoxy is a term that makes sense only within a community of people capable of determining what is and what is not orthodox. I will only note at this point that among us such a community seems notably in absence.

For the moment it is sufficient to point out that among us justice and truth have become enemies whose advocates appear not to belong to a single community. Rather, they more often than not seem to represent warring parties who want as little to do with one another as is possible. Having made this observation, a rather cruel irony makes an appearance, namely, the advocates of both the justice party and the truth party become in turn enemies of a third group. The members of this third group often term themselves the middle way; and from this place in the middle plead for unity

in ways that to both left and right make justice and truth subordinate to what seems a meaningless, indeed vacuous, form of being together. What is unity apart from justice? What is unity apart from truth? These are the questions the two ends put to the middle.

The questions are fair as long as the middle has no real content. However, the unity called for in the Letter to the Ephesians is far from a vacuous middle ground. As I hope to show, it is a way of being together that is defined by a certain sort of social space. Paul terms this space the body of Christ—a body that is animated by one Spirit. He also refers to it as a new Adam or human kind—one not marked by the confusion of tongues that characterize human life after Babel. The Letter to the Ephesians goes on to say that members of this body are citizens of a single city and members of a single household descended from one Father. It is certainly not the case that the body is free from illness, or that the members of the household do not squabble. Of course they do! As yet God is not all in all! However, the social space Christians now live in, because it is contained within a single body, city, or household, requires certain ways of living together. This way is characterized first of all by a form of love that makes its inhabitants, above all else, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. And within this space they are to remember always who they are---a people with one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. It is this identity that marks their point of departure. It is this character that provides the energy that moves them to action.

In short, agreements about justice and truth do not lead up to an agreement to be one. We don't first get justice and truth right and then join with fellow-minded persons to form a church. Rather, we are grafted into God's assembly, the church, and there we come to understand both justice and truth; and, if we are faithful to our own identity, we do so in a way that deepens rather than fractures the unity that binds us in the first place. It is the fact of unity that sets the stage for settling disputes about the nature of justice and truth. It doesn't work the other way around. Apart from this common point of departure, justice and truth remain perpetually warring siblings whose relation is like that between Cain and Abel—fratricidal. One lies in the grave while the other roams the earth looking for a home.

III

Now, having made my statement about the primacy of unity, it may be the case that each of you, be you liberal, conservative, or moderate, are saying to yourselves, I certainly agree. I am a firm believer in the importance of unity. These days, despite our divisions, Anglicans all talk about unity. Our favorite term for unity is *koinonia* or “fellowship.” The problem is that each, be we liberal, conservative, or moderate, have “trimmed” or reduced the meaning of the term in ways that belie or distort its use in a manner that, shall we say, is not “Christianly apt.” This observation brings us to the second of the two questions I asked at the outset. What does unity, or as we say these days, communion, look like? This question must be asked and answered if one is to determine whether or not the way in which liberals, conservatives and moderates speak of unity has any resemblance to the way in which Christians ought to speak of it.

If one studies progressive accounts of communion, the fellowship of Christians within the Anglican Communion is displayed almost completely in moral terms. Thus, for example, the recently published collection of essays, *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism*, assumed throughout an irreducible pluralism among Christians in respect to faith and morals. Because of this insuperable diversity, agreements in respect to belief and practice lie beyond our reach. Indeed, for many such diversity is both necessary and good. However, even if agreements in faith and morals lie beyond reach, the parishes, dioceses, and provinces of the Anglican Communion can, nonetheless, enter into and sustain forms of communion rooted in the moral virtues and practices of love, respect, service, and hospitality. These virtues and practices provide the warp and woof Christian unity. What is more, within their confines, each parish, diocese and province is autonomous in respect to other matters. The diversity engendered by local option is not contrary to communion as long as relations of love, respect, service, and hospitality remain vibrant and intact.

It is not surprising that the doctrinal and moral pluralism so central to the progressive view has sparked a conservative reaction. It is not surprising either that, given the implied or directly stated pluralism of the progressive view, the reaction focuses on the question of theological and moral truth. Several examples of this reaction lie close to hand, but the most illustrative are an article that appeared in the book, *To Mend the Net*, the changes made not long ago in the Constitution of the Anglican Church in Nigeria, and the most recent declaration of Common Cause. In each of these documents,

truth is located in the traditional formularies of Anglicanism, namely, the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662), the *Ordinal*, the *39 Articles of Religion*, Canon Law (as locally adapted), and (more than a little doubtfully) the Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Church. It seems fair to say that if the view of communion espoused by progressive voices focuses on its moral nature, that espoused by conservatives tends to focus on its creedal/confessional/liturgical/legal content. It also seems fair to say that this confessional focus is meant to highlight (a) the fundamental significance of doctrinal and moral agreement for communion and (b) the necessity of conformity to officially sanctioned definitions of what are acceptable forms of belief and practice.

I suspect that most here, though they may be defenders of either a progressive or traditional approach to the issues that divide us, sense that each of these positions (though it may contain much truth) is inadequate. The question is do we have a more adequate account of Christian unity. I believe we do; and that account is to be found, despite notable shortcomings, in the Windsor Report. Though it contains both, the view of communion present in the Windsor Report is far more complex than either the moral or confessional views outlined above. Thus, communion is said to “subsist” in the following: “visible unity, common confession of the apostolic faith, common belief in scripture and the creeds, common baptism and shared Eucharist, and a mutually recognized common ministry.” (WR #49) Windsor goes on to assert that, though communion demands uniformity of neither theological opinion nor devotional practice, it does demand that “each church acknowledges and respects the interdependence and autonomy of the other, putting the needs of the global fellowship before its own.” (WR #49)

Let us pause for a moment and note just how complex the notion with which we are being presented in fact is. Communion is relational in that it involves an interdependent common life in which the good of the parts are subservient to the good of the whole and the good of the whole depends upon the good of the parts. It subsists in a common confession that accords with the apostolic faith. This faith is derived from Holy Scripture, sustained by common sacramental life, and given expression in common creeds. Further, common belief and life are sustained, furthered, and protected by a mutually recognized common ministry.

Of course, here we have what amounts to an exposition of the Chicago/Lambeth Quadrilateral. However, Windsor also speaks of the “Bonds of Communion”—those practices and institutions that do more than

stipulate points of reference for any discussion of church unity. The “Bonds of Communion” address the actual processes and institutions by means of which space is provided within the passage of time for the achievement, preservation, and furtherance of communion. Unlike the progressive view, Windsor insists that communion requires common confession and common practice in respect to matters that might, if inadequately articulated, compromise the gospel with which the church has been entrusted. Unlike the traditionalist position, however, Windsor recognizes that unity in these affairs is a matter of constant challenge rather than an existent state against which one can measure more or less exactly (by reference to a formulary) the compliance of a given province, diocese, or parish with catholic belief and practice.

Thus, among the Bonds of Communion Windsor gives pride of place to the reading of scripture within the common worship of the church. It does not turn first to formularies or creeds, but to the source of both, namely, the bible. It does not give in to an inevitable pluralism of interpretation but calls instead for a shared reading that takes place across the cultural and historical divides that so often threaten communion. (WR # 62) The report’s authors are fully aware of what a formidable task shared reading might prove; but in aid of this necessary bond they turn to the teaching authority of Bishops and the moral authority of the various instruments of unity that have evolved in the history of the Communion. These instruments are the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the Meeting of the Primates.

When disputed matters arise, the report calls on the various provinces of the communion to wait upon one another in mutual subjection through a process of reception. During the process, they are to restrain themselves from taking actions that are either precipitous or run contrary to what is plainly Anglican teaching. In this process a common reading of the bible is sought, and both Episcopal authority and the mind and moral authority of the various instruments of unity impede idiosyncratic action.

Here we find no curial form of church polity and no confessional stringency. Here we find also more than a moral definition of communion. What we do find is recognition of both the fundamental importance of communion and its precarious condition prior to Christ’s return. We find a thick definition of communion—one involving common belief, moral practice, worship, witness, and order. We find also openness for the adaptation of this thick understanding to local conditions. Finally we find the articulation of a process that will prevent schism as the necessary

processes of discernment go on over time. Here, in short, we find the tracing of a hard road and narrow way that mark a long journey through the temptations I have identified above— trimming the notion of communion either by reducing it to a set of ethical demands or a set of confessional agreements, or dismissing its importance by forms of pragmatic congregationalism (parochial, diocesan, or provincial) that we piously label “local option.”

IV

Here we have a fairly clear demarcation of the boundaries of a social space notably different from the one we now inhabit. It is a social space that presupposes the primary importance of unity. It is a social place that marks off what might be called a space in time in which people who are eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace can reconcile the differences that may arise among them. We are still, however, left with the third of our questions. How do we go about maintaining the unity that defines the very purpose of our existence?

The first thing to be said is that the unity to which we are called, prior to our Lord’s return, cannot be maintained among Anglicans apart from Bishops who understand that their primary responsibility is to promote and defend that unity. At present, at least within TEC, our bishops seem to have lost sight of that calling; and we will remain at war with ourselves as long as this situation remains un-rectified. It is enough to say on this occasion, that reform in the way in which we elect bishops and in the way they carry out their office is a necessary step if we are ever again to enjoy the sort of unity envisioned in the Letter to the Ephesians or the Windsor Report.

However, the sort of unity that produces a people who are marked by one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, cannot be sustained by order alone. The unity of Christ requires the presence among the members of his body of certain graces that open up, sustain, and even expand the space in time needed to find unity when people are divided. It is precisely for this reason that the 4th chapter of Ephesians opens with an appeal to its readers “to live a life worthy of the calling to which they have been called.” We now know the nature of that calling. It is a calling to unity. Consequently, in spelling out the sort of life that is worthy, the author of Ephesians links the secret (*mysterion*) of God’s purpose made known in Christ with the life of the Church that is to exemplify it. Thus, the author of this letter not only urges a particular form of behavior, he also gives specific content to the sort of unity God has in mind. It is a unity of persons, each of whom has a particular gift to offer within the communion of saints. (Eph. 4:

11-16) It is also a unity characterized by the presence of certain powers of soul within the “body” and within the commonwealth, certain common practices which, in combination, give love (the basis of unity) a recognizable face. These powers of soul and practices all imitate the sacrificial life of Christ. They are set out as follows: a certain humility of mind (*tapeinophrosunee*), a sort of respectfulness toward others that treats them as if they were one’s betters (*praus*), and a degree of patience (*makrothumia*) that manifests itself in refusing to be provoked by difficult people (*anechomai*) out of love (*agapee*) for them. (Eph. 4: 1-2) Love of this sort provides both the basis and the content of the unity God seeks. It also manifests itself in being kind (*chreestos*) and compassionate (*eusplagchnos*) and in being mutually forgiving of wrongs done (*charidzomai*). (Eph. 4: 32)

I have just provided a very free translation of these verses. “I, therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love...and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” I wish we could spend an hour or so on each of these little words. We can’t, but just imagine what it would be like if these little words described occasions like this one when we meet together to discuss matters of common concern to the members of Christ’s body. Once again translating freely, imagine what it would be like if each of us possessed the sort of humility of mind or openness to instruction that produced a question like this one. What is the weak part of my position? What would it take to show me wrong? What do I have to learn from this person with whom I disagree? Or again, what would it be like if we approached each other with gentleness, born of an awareness of the sanctity and vulnerability of the person speaking or the person sitting next to me? Just suppose each of us were in no hurry to get to the end of the thorny issues we face. Just suppose we were patient enough to wait upon the Lord to give us answers we can’t find ourselves. And in the process, suppose we refused to be provoked by those among us who are arrogant, rude, pushy, and just plain stubborn. And suppose we showed kindness, compassion and forgiveness to the very ones who both offend and injure us?

What would such a convention look like? It would, I believe, look worthy of the calling to which we have been called. It would certainly look different from another form of life described in the letter—one filled with evil talk, bitterness, anger, slander, malice and my favorite—clamor—that is, contentious argument that will brook no objection. It is this form of life that

now characterizes the better part of the meetings we seem to have. It is this form of life that has, in the words of the Windsor Report, torn the very fabric of our communion.

Now let me return to the beginning of these remarks. There I said I have not come here to solve our problems. A solution lies beyond my reach and the reach of us all. It lies in the hands of God. That being the case, what can we do here as we meditate on the phrase “One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all?” We can, I believe, recognize how unworthy our life together is; and we can set out to enter another social space—one that more adequately reflects the calling to which we have been called. We can, I believe, resolve to provide a counter example to the way in which our church now most frequently goes about its business. We can seek to be something different, and we can trust God to do great things with our feeble, halting efforts. We can trust that God who raised Christ from the dead will do the same for us. And as dry bones that have been given new life, we will find ourselves animated by a different Spirit—one eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. What is more, we will be seen in a different way by those not among our number. We will be seen as a people with one Lord, one faith, one baptism who worship one God and Father of all.