

Testimony to the Lambeth Commission (15 June 2004)

By Michael Howell, Ph.D.

(NOTE: Due to time constraints, some sections of this testimony were not included in the actual presentation to the Commission.)

Members of the Commission, in the name of Jesus the one and true Christ, Grace and Peace to you. I would like to echo the earlier sentiments of my brothers and sister, in giving thanks for the work you are doing. I will continue to keep all of you and the Anglican Communion in my prayers.

I speak to you as a single, black, heterosexual man, a professor of science, and someone who has spent all of his life as an Episcopalian. It causes me great pain to begin by stating that I am ashamed of the fact that over the past year, the most newsworthy thing about the Episcopal Church is that it consecrated a non-celibate homosexual as the bishop of New Hampshire, instead of being distinguished as a place where sinners become transformed into holy and vibrant witnesses for the Gospel of Christ.

Not a Matter of Homosexuality, but the Affirmation of Sin as Righteousness

In the time since that event, we have heard that the church has gotten through other matters of disagreement, and that the controversial decisions of the 74th General Convention will seem insignificant as time passes. I must strongly disagree, as the ECUSA's recent sexuality decisions are quite different. Whether or not we choose to admit it, the core question of this controversy is this: ***Can we as a Church remain faithful to God by affirming sin as righteousness?*** If the answer is yes, then I must sincerely ask, why do we as humans need the death and resurrection of Jesus?

You see, I am not a Christian because I feel Christianity is something good. I am a Christian because I feel it is the truth. Only through the cross of Jesus can we ever become reconciled to God and live our lives in accordance with his will for his glory. No amount of good works on my part could ever substitute for the cross and no personal feelings and desires can turn what God has deemed sinful into anything righteous. To state the contrary is nothing short of affirming a new religion. This is important, as many people have called for "tolerance," "to live amicably with diverse viewpoints," to "promote and celebrate inclusivity," and to recognize our unity in baptism and mission. I do not see how it is possible to have any unity or to engage in any common mission with anyone who affirms their sinful behavior as something good in the eyes of God.

The topic of human sexuality and sin is not a political one, where compromises can be made for what is deemed to be the popular good. Our better good is only possible through complete obedience to God and is manifested by a desire to live our lives in righteousness and truth. When Jesus comes to judge me, he is not going to focus whether or not I affirmed the canons and decisions of, or even remained in, the Episcopal Church.

Rather, he is going to look at whether or not I was faithful in doing all that he commanded me to do, as someone who was baptized into the reality of his death and resurrection.

The Promotion of “False” Parallels With Matters of Civil Rights and Justice

I was an alternate deputy to the 2003 General Convention of the Episcopal Church. As such, I participated in many of the hearings that led to the events that lie behind the creation of this commission. After the House of Deputies confirmed the nomination of Gene Robinson as Bishop Coadjutor of New Hampshire, a deputy (who happened to be a black female who had an active ministry with inner city youth) turned to me and stated, “What can I possibly now say to these young people, after what I have taught them about sexual purity and Godly living?”

As a Black American who is proud of his West Indian heritage, I am outraged that the very same Episcopal Church that prides itself on being racially inclusive ignored the clear and unambiguous pleas of our brothers and sisters from the Global South (many of whom are non-white). The church did this by taking unilateral action through its controversial decisions. For me, there is no defense for this hypocrisy. I was also very disturbed by the fact that many of the deputies and bishops of color have chosen to support and embrace the sexual immorality that is destroying the very communities that we live in. Many people have attempted to liken the Christian justification for advocating for the civil rights of all citizens, with the advocacy and acceptance of homosexual behavior. This is a dangerous practice, as it (1) trivializes the past and current struggles against racism and (2) leads many good people astray, by distorting what holy scripture says about justice and what both science and scripture have told us about homosexual behavior.

For example, at the 2003 ECUSA General Convention, Suffragan Bishop Gayle Harris of the Diocese of Massachusetts, an African-American woman, attempted to discredit scriptural passages that explicitly speak about homosexual behavior by stating:

“You can’t just stop with the Bible. The Bible said slavery is okay. You want to put me back in chains? I don’t think so!”

Yet, scripture is clear that it has been God’s intention from the beginning that all peoples (including both Gentiles and Jews) would be reconciled to him and be included into the fold of salvation. More importantly, slavery is never explicitly condoned in the Bible and by the time of the Pauline epistles, it is something to be eradicated.

You see, we cannot get around the very plain and clear fact that scripture always condemns homosexual behavior, both in terms of what is written and what can be inferred from careful and rigorous biblical scholarship. In *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, Dr. Robert Gagnon demonstrates that when these scriptures are properly studied in their context, only practices such as incest and bestiality can be considered to be on par with homosexual behavior.

Now let me also affirm that for a Christian there is never any justification for acts of hatred, abuse or violence towards anyone, including those with whom we may disagree. However, it is wrong to state that the struggle to win acceptance of sinful behavior as being good and holy has the same biblical basis as the struggle for bringing people of every race and nation into the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation to anyone who accepts Jesus as Lord and Savior.

What Science REALLY Says and Why It Doesn't Matter

The preponderance of peer-reviewed scientific data indicates that racial attributes cannot be viewed in the same light as homosexual behavior. Race is a genetically-determined attribute, which cannot be altered or chosen. The most comprehensive scientific research to date cannot definitively link homosexuality with any unique ontogenetic factors, and can only classify it as a behavioral lifestyle.

However, the fact remains that even if such data (i.e., data that supports the hypothesis that people are born as homosexuals) existed, God's expectations for how we live our lives would not change. I am a single heterosexual male. The presence of my God-given sexual desires, no matter how strong they may be, is not a warrant for acting on them under the illusion of happiness through sexual fulfillment. Many humans are blessed with the gift of sexual expression, which God has intended for enjoyment between a man and woman covenanted to one another in Holy Matrimony. It is also true that some of us may never experience that blessing. But regardless of whether or not God will bless any of us with the gift of a spouse, we must remember that sexual fulfillment is not an inherent "right" of any Christian. God is not inherently obligated to provide me or anyone else with a means of expressing sexual feelings in return for being faithful to him.

Unfortunately, many of the controversies surrounding human sexuality are founded on this false understanding, stemming from a worldly gospel that seeks self-fulfillment as its ultimate goal. It would be easy for me to give into my feelings, and in many ways I would become more popular and feel less ostracized. Yet I recognize that I would be taking the wide and easy path that leads to sorrow and destruction, while forsaking the narrow path that leads to righteousness and eternal life.

Honesty and Repentance: The Requirements for True Reconciliation

There has been a disturbing trend throughout the various discussions that have taken place on deeming homosexual behavior as good and holy. I am also deeply concerned that ECUSA has been dishonest in the process of promoting and embracing this false teaching. Last year, Bishop Michael Curry of the Diocese of North Carolina, wrote a letter to his diocese on his decision to support the election of Gene Robinson as Bishop Coadjutor of New Hampshire. He stated:

"These facts led me to conclude that the biblical writers simply were not addressing questions about homosexuality as we are dealing with them. Peter Gomes says it best: 'The biblical writers never contemplated a form of homosexuality in which loving, monogamous, and faithful persons sought to live out the implications of the

gospel with as much fidelity to it as any heterosexual believer. All they knew of homosexuality was prostitution, pederasty, lasciviousness and exploitation.”

Yet, a review of Bishop Curry’s bibliography revealed that for whatever reason, he never considered the work of scholars such as Gagnon, who through an examination of the temporally-relevant literature has shown that the concept of monogamous and non-exploitative homosexual relationships were indeed known to biblical writers.

The Episcopal Church will be unable to repent of its recent actions unless there is honesty in our discussions on human sexuality. This is important, as there is no hope for any kind of reconciliation, unless the church repents of its actions.

God’s Love: Far More than a Feeling

Whether by deliberate choice or by well-intentioned error, many people have attempted to sidetrack the process of repentance and renewal by stating that we should not become concerned about “issues” and just to focus on loving God and one another. While it is true that the greatest commandments must always be at the forefront of our Christian lives, we are not given license to forget what loving God and one’s neighbor entails. All too often, *agape* has been erroneously degraded into nothing more than having good feelings towards someone and to validate whatever makes them feel good about themselves.

Simply put this is not the *agape* (or the spirit of the Hebrew *ahab*) that is revealed in scripture. As the late William Barclay noted, Godly love always places what is in a person’s highest (Godly) good, first and foremost, at all times and in all places. The theologian B. J. Bamberger reminds us that this kind of love indicates far more than an inward state of feeling, but rather one that is coupled to an outward state of devotion and loyalty to God and are therefore, two sides of the same coin. True Godly love cannot be disconnected from complete obedience to Him. This concept was very familiar to the Jewish people, as evidenced by the writings of the rabbinical sages: “*We can best express this love (ahab) when we conduct ourselves in such a manner to make God beloved by others.*”

The sages recognized that this love is not something that exists to make us popular or to be liked by people. It is through steadfast faithfulness that others are drawn into Godly love, not through affirming sinful actions. Indeed, Jesus affirmed this when he told us that in order to love him, we have to keep his commandments, which are at the core of the moral teaching that he came not to destroy, but rather, to uphold.

Faithful activism against the current sexuality crisis in the Episcopal Church is very much a proper and necessary outcome of the *agape* that our Lord commanded us to observe.

The Church Is Not a Moral Social Service Agency

I am a sinner, and as such, I do not need the church to be a place that promotes and advocates worldviews. Moreover, I don’t need the Church if I want to live with people who don’t affirm God’s standards for sexuality. I can do many good works with non-

Christian organizations and be a respected member of my community for doing such. But in God there is unique truth and he expects me to live my life in accordance with that truth. The Church must do the same if it is to successfully carry out her mission in this world. The cross of Jesus is my only hope to be a true and active part of that mission, which I pray will be restored to this branch of the Church Catholic, the Episcopal Church that I once felt blessed to be a part of.

May the Holy Spirit guide you in this process and God bless you all.