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TURNING POINT

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"We struggled against apartheid because we were being blamed and made to suffer for something we could do nothing about. It is the same with homosexuality. The orientation is a given, not a matter of choice. It would be crazy for someone to choose to be gay..."

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

HOW TO BE TRUE TO THE BIBLE AND SAY "YES" TO SAME-SEX UNIONS!

I was in Baltimore for Cathedral services of the Diocese of Maryland early in April. The Dean had arranged an evening meeting when I would be with some of the Cathedral Chapter (Vestry) who had been studying my book, *SERVANTHOOD*. Because a few members of the Chapter were rehearsing for Holy Week as part of the choir that evening, only about a dozen people were expected. To my astonishment (and the Dean's) about 35 men and women showed up. They gathered in a wide circle that stretched almost wall to wall in a large reception room. All but three of the people in the circle were complete strangers to me, so I asked that each one take a minute to tell me about themselves — offering their names and answering two questions: (a) had they been life-long Episcopalians and, if not, from what church affiliation had they come? and (b) what did they like about the Episcopal Church? I was gladdened by two things that

dominated their answers. They liked best (a) the Church's wide embrace of diversity and (b) the sense of it being their spiritual home.

The man sitting on my right was the last to speak about himself, the exercise having started 40 minutes before on my left. In the course of hearing from each one in turn I noticed that he had been writing in a small notebook. When it came his turn he gave his name and then recited a personal limerick that summed up the two dominant themes that emerged in the answers around the circle:

There was once a Catholic named J.
Who found out at age three he was gay.
Long hours in confession
Brought an awful depression
"Til the Anglicans said "Okay."

Hardly all of us in the Anglican tradition have come to such liberality of spirit about homosexuality, but one of the reasons for the general wideness of the Anglican embrace is our history of



Saint Paul
by Rembrandt, 1669-1699

avoiding a fundamentalist handling of the Bible as an inerrant record of God's dictation to human scribes. To think of St. Paul as a "passive stenographer" for the Holy Spirit is utterly absurd. He is a creative genius — a writer of profoundly personal and sharply controversial color. His writing reveals a steadily maturing and occasionally changing emphasis over time — from the early 50's A.D. to just before his death in about 64. His letter to the little

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cluster of Christians in Rome stands as the theological masterpiece of his whole corpus. It has been the spiritual and intellectual well-spring of our keenest grasp on the meaning of the Gospel for all the Christian centuries since. St. Paul remains the Church's defining theologian and ethicist.

There are at least two things we *don't know* about his letter to the Romans: (a) exactly when it was written (we guess around 58 A.D.) and (b) when it began to be circulated as worthy of high sacred regard. But two things we *do know* about it. (a) Eventually it was accorded first place in the series of collected letters of Paul and others in a 27 document anthology which came to be called the New Testament — so as to distinguish the Christian collection from the more ancient sacred anthology of our forebears in the Jewish tradition. And (b) a sentence early in the body of the letter was understood to be a heavy and holy prohibition of same-sex passion and intimacy. (Romans 1:26-27). From that first Christian generation until now, in the long development of our tradition, homosexual activity has been condemned as morally repugnant and fiercely forbidden. For most of us who seriously honor Scripture these verses still stand as the capital New Testament text that *unequivocally prohibit homosexual behavior*. More prohibitively, this text has been taken to mean that even a *same-sex inclination* is reprehensible, so that a type of humanity known as "homosexual" has steadily become the object of contempt and discrimination.

Even the great Billy Graham made a public statement a few years ago to the effect that "all homosexuals should be castrated" — an intemperate and irrational utterance for which he publicly and emphatically apologized soon afterward, to his enduring credit. But discriminatory prejudice continues to prevail, feverishly and broadly across the world — symbolized by such ugly terms of scorn as "fag", "fairy", "queer", etc. The term "fag" has a savage origin. It is the shortened version of "faggot", a word for the sticks of dry wood used in the execution of homosexuals burned at the stake in medieval England. Even now there is savagery in the language of some political leadership. President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe has denounced homosexuals over the past four years as "pigs" and "perverts", making it clear that gay men and women are not welcome in Zimbabwe. (Reported on the Internet, March 3, 1998).

Consider, then, what two verses in the original Greek of St. Paul's letter to the Romans have sanctioned: a globally spreading visceral revulsion and persecution of homosexuality. Along with that has gone the parallel agony of self-loathing, silence and incalculable suffering on the part of our fellow human beings. References in the Old Testament also forbid homosexual behavior. One of them in Leviticus prescribes the death penalty for both parties to the act (Lev. 20:13). But the verses in Romans are the capital source of centuries-long *Christian* contempt of homosexuals — and the root of continuing insistence on the immorality of homosexual intimacy.

The Bible will always be definitive for the Church's faith, but in the Anglican tradition Holy Scripture is open to what scholars call "hermeneutical" treatment. Hermeneutics means "informed and reasoned interpretation". In other words, the Bible is not self-authenticating. It needs to be seen in all the light that every new era of history and scholarship can provide. No doubt others who read the Bible with seriousness have discovered what suddenly dawned on me a few weeks ago when reading Romans 1:26-27 for the umpteenth time. **In those lynch-pin verses St. Paul never uses the word "homosexual"**. Instead he uses the terms "natural" and "unnatural". The operative term in Paul's original Greek is "phooskos", meaning "in-born", "produced by nature", "agreeable to nature". Here are the verses in the King James Version, the 1611 translation cherished by most conservative segments of the Christian family of churches. The KJV is also the version lots of us older folks grew up with as kids, memorizing verses under family and Sunday School auspices. Not surprisingly, given the first century scorn of women, Paul begins with them:

"... even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another..."

Notice the "use" of women by men as a biblical expression of male/female relational norms from the 1st thru the 17th centuries.

It is exceedingly important to see that the most conservative handlers of Scripture, our fundamentalist sisters and brothers, also use a hermeneutical (interpretive) approach to the Bible — as proved by their latitude toward the cruel text in Leviticus. I know of no version of Christianity that advocates a sentence of death for active homosexuals. Quite the contrary. The most conservative Christians insist that homosexuality is a curable dysfunction; so they mount programs of compassion and therapy that aim at healing the “disease”. I myself was so minded until some years ago when I was invited into personal and prolonged encounter with gay and lesbian men and women as Bishop of Atlanta. I now hold, with Desmond Tutu, that same-sex orientation for the overwhelming majority of gay men and lesbian women is an in-born and unchangeable natural identity.

See where this leads. If it be granted that gay and lesbian identity is “natural”, then St. Paul can be scrupulously honored wherever homosexuality is seen to be rooted in Paul’s own word: *phooskos*, meaning “agreeable to nature”. As we have evolved a new and higher regard for women than was true for Paul in his time, so we are evolving a new regard for same-sex attraction than was true for Paul, and for most of us, in both his time and our own. That is why the Episcopal Church and other progressively oriented denominations are moving toward legitimizing “same-sex unions”. It is a plain matter of justice. It is also a matter of providing a sacramental structure for the expression and

protection of the Christian sexual ethic of monogamy, fidelity and life-long intent.

Be it understood that the Christian Church did not invent “opposite-sex unions”. Long ago we simply entered into blessing what we believe God has ordained. We erected a sacred social structure for expressing and protecting Christian sexual ethics and the Christian purposes of marriage — purposes which canon law of the Episcopal Church enumerates as “mutual fellowship, encouragement, and understanding; secondly for the procreation, if it may be, of children.... and for the safeguarding and benefit of society.” Notice that procreation not only takes second place to the prior purpose of mutual enhancement, but that it is acknowledged to be an *option* in opposite-sex marriages. Same-sex unions therefore do not violate the marriage canons of the Episcopal Church.

What then are we waiting for? Consensus agreement to the blessing of same-sex unions? Probably not. Consensus would be highly desirable, but also highly unlikely, given the wide visceral resistance to the legitimacy of homosexual identity and activity. What I believe we must wait for is the gradual mounting of a fresh understanding that the capital text of the New Testament is neither dishonored nor circumvented by legitimizing gay and lesbian orientation. This will take time, but time is on the side of our evolving embrace of the “naturalness” of same-sex attraction and intimacy. What I have argued in this essay has taken me years to develop as a firm and grandly liberating conviction.

St. Paul, preeminent formulator of Gospel theology, writes often about gifts of the Spirit. Among the gifts (in his original Greek) are “*hupomenay*” and “*macrothumia*” — “patience” and “long-suffering”. Such qualities are expressions of love — always the first spiritual gift in all of Paul’s catalogues — love of God and love of neighbor. I believe this means that eventually we are going to express that love by a decision of **SERVANTHOOD** to the faithful homosexuals among us.

We will favor same-sex unions that protect the same Christian sexual ethics that apply to conventional marriage. But *that decision will not include everyone*, any more than a decision to declare independence from English colonial rule in 1776 included everyone. The decision will likely prompt a minor schism in the churches, as it did in the new nation by chasing colonial Tories into Canada. But in the long view of things schism, on the whole, has been cleansing and renewing. There would be no Christians were it not that St. Paul himself bravely led the way to schism from Judaism — nor would millions of us be Anglicans, Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists and Presbyterians were it not for the grace and grit of towering Servant Leaders in our Reformation pasts: Cranmer, Zwingli, Luther, Wesley and Calvin.

Fear not schism. Fear only continued infidelity to the call of compassion and justice in Jesus Christ by straining the patience and long-suffering of our homosexual sisters and brothers.

Bennett J. Sims