

August 24, 2003

The Rt. Rev. Herbert Thompson, Jr., Bishop of Southern Ohio
412 Sycamore Street
Cincinnati, OH 45202-4179

Dear Bishop Thompson,

We, the undersigned, concerned members of The Church of the Ascension in Middletown, Ohio – being cognizant your plea for unity – feel that we must express our sadness and concern over the actions of the 74th General Convention of the Episcopal Church.

As concerned Episcopalians we wish to share with you that we support our Rector's position as expressed in his sermon from August 10th, 2003 and the resolution of our Vestry adopted on August 18, 2003 – both of which are attached for your information – and commend both of them to your prayerful and considerate review.

We hope that, as time progresses and significant prayers are offered, the decisions of the 74th General Convention may be rethought.

In the service of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Our Lord.
Members of the Church of the Ascension

Attachments: 2 a/s

Resolution of the Vestry of the Church of the Ascension, passed August 18, 2003

The majority of the Vestry and Parish Leaders present at the August 18th meeting of the Church Of The Ascension wholeheartedly endorse and stand behind the sermon of The Rev Walter J. Mycoff, Jr. on August 10th which addressed the actions of the 74th General Convention of the Episcopal Church and we, as the Vestry and Parish Leaders, repudiate the decisions of this Convention concerning the consent to the election of the Bishop Coadjutor Elect of New Hampshire and to the recognition and approval of same-sex unions.

Transcript of sermon by The Rev. Walter J. Mycoff, Jr., Rector, The Church of the Ascension, Middletown, Ohio for Sunday, August 10, 2003.

I've taken as my theme verse today, the 22nd verse of the 1st Chapter of Romans. A wealthy businessman became infatuated by the Christian message of God's love for all people in Jesus Christ. And, over time, this man became convinced that there were really two primary gods: the god of wrath and the god of love. He set about studying diligently and came to the belief that what we call the Old Testament revealed the god of wrath. Therefore, this testament should be repressed and not used by Christian people. Even the writings of the apostle Paul and others in the early church should be expunged of any references to Old Testament teaching and thinking.

And so Marcion put together a body of written teachings that spoke only of God's love for all people. Marcion lived in about 150 AD, and it was in response to his teaching that

the church fathers began to form the canon of what we now know as the New Testament, and affirming the Old Testament as having authority; and that there was but one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Throughout the centuries, the Christian church has affirmed the basic canon of books known as the Old and New Testaments to be the revealed, and I say *the revealed*, Word of God.

In the sixteenth century, when the English Reformation reached agreement on matters of doctrine known as the 39 Articles of Religion, the authority of Scripture was affirmed. These Articles are still printed in our Book of Common Prayer today that you have in the pews, and that begins on page 867. The articles that apply particularly to the authority of Scripture in our church are: Article 6, which in part reads:

“Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation, so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it would be believed as an Article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation”. (BCP p. 868)

Article 19 states; in part “ *The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men (people) in which the pure Word of God is preached.*”(BCP 871)

And, finally, Article 20 says: “The Church has power to decree Rites and Ceremonies, and authority in controversies of Faith; and yet it is not to be lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God’s Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and keeper of Holy Writ (Scripture), yet, as it ought not to decree anything against the same...(BCP 871).

It is in the context of this brief history lesson that I address our reading from Romans 1: 22 ff in the light of actions taken by the 74th General convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, of which our bishop has spoken in his pastoral letter to us today.

In this passage the main issue being spoken to is Idolatry; “claiming to be wise, they became fools; and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts...” (Romans 1:22-24)

The remainder of the chapter has to do with how God deals with the people who have turned from worship of the Creator to worship of the creation.

The first order of mission in calling people to faith in Jesus Christ is to speak to the idolatry of the prevailing culture and society in which the Church exists.

The scriptural witness is that whenever a culture and society turns away from Him, there is a Holy Wrath administered.

In the Old Testament, this Wrath was often very overt: flood or fire would rain down and destroy the offending culture. But in the New Testament we often see God going about his wrathfulness in a more subtle way. Romans 1:24-25 says it this way:

“Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”

An internationally known Biblical scholar has written, “Divine discipline is the measure of grace, as divine permissiveness is the measure of wrath”. Let me read that again, Divine Discipline is the measure of grace, as divine permissiveness is the measure of wrath.” God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts.

Idolatry itself is very subtle. It sneaks up on you, particularly if you are religious. Without ever realizing it, we can be weaned away from worshiping the Creator God revealed in the Trinity, to worshipping the creature – the institution - the denominational church.

Our leaders look around and see dwindling numbers of people in the church. Pretty soon, we begin to do whatever it takes to get people to attend. We begin to offer something for everyone. Now, to a degree, this is a mission strategy that the Church has always followed when it’s gone into a culture or society. But, in the history of the church, there is always been much careful attention given that in doing so we do not depart from the Gospel and Word of God; that it is not compromised. Whenever such compromise has happened in the past – and it has- there have been voices raised from within to protest. And so it was in the 16th century, that there were many voices from within to protest various things and practices of the church.

When a church begins to compromise on basic authority, which for the Anglican Communion is Scripture first, and then tradition and reason, that church is endangered of being disciplined – dare I even say *experiencing* the Wrath of God, as we are told in Romans 1:24, by being given up to our own lusts of the hearts. These lusts and desires of the heart are listed in verse 29: envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, gossip, slander, etc.

In short, the church becomes no different than the culture and society for which it was created to speak. To speak the Word of God in Jesus Christ.

The church is called in mission to speak to the culture and society in which it exists - the Word of God in Jesus Christ. The church is called to speak the Word of God in the context of what it is to live righteously in the image of Christ. Well, such a church - instead of preaching the Gospel that invites all people to come and be transformed by the Power of the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – when this church ever so subtly begins to preach the gospel that says “Come as you are, stay as you are, die as you are” - or to be not so subtle; American mainline Protestant denominations are in danger of preaching the gospel that no longer says “Come as you are and be transformed into the image of Christ”, but rather a gospel that says, “Come in your sin, stay in your sin, die in your sin”.

Again, Romans 1:32 “They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die, yet they not only do them, but even applaud others who practice them.”

Now as I see it, the big issues regarding the actions of General Convention that has gained so much media attention this past week, is that whatever. *whatever.., whatever* your perspective is on this, that we ourselves as individual Christians, not resort to the behavior described in Romans 1:29-31. Particularly, that we do not resort to such behavior as deceit, craftiness, slander, faithlessness, heartlessness, and ruthlessness. That we **not** resort to this type of behavior - deceitfulness, craftiness, slander, faithlessness, heartlessness, and ruthlessness.

Honesty is called for on all sides. Therefore, I myself must be honest concerning the issue raised by the General Convention's actions. To do so, I call your attention to your insert and would you notice for your second reading, from Romans 1, that there is actually part of verse 26, and all of verses 27 and 28 missing from that reading.

It was my decision to not have them as part of the general reading, because I didn't want you to get focused on them until now. "For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions (that's the end of verse 26), their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own person the due penalty for their error."

I did not read these verses because I believe it is important not to make more of them than is intended in this Scriptural context. In other words, I do not want to use them to "proof-text" my position. Paul is using them as an example of what happens when people become or fall into idolatry. In Scripture, homosexuality is no more grievous sexual sin than is adultery or fornication - but it is sin – according to Scripture – and is not blessed. Neither is adultery or fornication

When I was first ordained and began in the parish ministry, whenever I did pre-marital counseling, it was an exception, an **exception to** have a couple come into my office that were living together prior to the blessing of sacred marriage. It was the **exception**. Today, it is the norm. The exception is when I encounter a couple – particularly a young couple – that is not living together before Holy Marriage.

My pastoral heart says 'OK. We can fix that - let's just move on and fix it with a ritual.' But if I give in to that temptation, I am not doing my job as an ordained pastor. No, I must call them into account for the way they have been living, no matter how much they love one another, and that they undergo a repentance for that way of life. And, yes, I have had some couples get up at that point and walk out – never to be seen again. Dare I not do that, and gain another member of the church? Possibly. But I cannot in good conscience just let it pass without a repentance.

When our clergy fall into the sexual sin of adultery, they are called into **repentance**. They are prevented, for a period of time, during that period of repentance and reconciliation, from functioning in the priesthood. Therefore, I cannot agree with the actions of General Convention. But, on the other hand, I would not go with the radicals on the other side that say – and use "proof-texting" – to say that anyone who is homosexual is not a Christian and cannot be saved. I daresay, that even though in the mainline denominations our pews are getting emptier and emptier, if we held that position about every person who ever committed adultery or fornication, or, as Jesus said, if you even think about it you've committed it – our pews would be totally empty, and there probably wouldn't be many people in the pulpit.

Now, Jimmy Carter really got clobbered when he was honest that way. I don't know about females, but I know males have a problem with disciplining their minds, particularly when they are young. But if we are to live in the discipline of the revelation of God's Word, that discipline must be exercised. It has nothing to do with our orientation but has to do with what we act upon. For we are all sinners and fall short of the Glory of God. The Beloved Disciple himself, John tells us in I John, Chapter 1, verses 8-10 "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar, and His word is not in us.

To all people, no matter who or what you are, Jesus invites you to come to the table in His Church. But that invitation is done in the expectation of personal transformation into the image of Jesus Christ. Scripture attests that, when we accept Jesus into our lives as our Lord and our Savior, transformation is an option. Becomes a realistic option. Now, granted, none of us come into full righteousness in this sin-sick world. Scripture again shares that that will not happen until Jesus Himself comes in the end time. But we also need to take note that the Gospel reveals that the Kingdom of Heaven isn't something that's just going to come in the by and by. The kingdom of Heaven is here, and when we enter into the Kingdom of Heaven through following Jesus as "the truth, the way and the light" (John 14:6) we begin to be transformed.

Again, in the words of the Beloved Disciple, "my little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin, but if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, and He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."

So – where do we go from here? I've been asked that question quite a bit the last few days and all I can say is where I am going. I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying right here in this church. In 1972 I was ordained to the priesthood. At that time I signed a statement that I would abide by the authority of Scripture – as passed down to us. That I would obey my Bishop and that I would be obedient to the doctrine and the discipline of the Episcopal Church as that church received it through the Anglican Reformation, i.e., the 39 Articles of Religion. That's the paper that I signed. That's what I will continue to live by. Obedience to the authority of Scripture, obedience to my Bishop, and obedience to the doctrine and discipline of the Episcopal Church, **as it received that doctrine, discipline and tradition.**

I will not accept changes in that doctrine. However, I am told that there is room for everyone in this church, and our polity, as I spoke on two weeks ago, is such that the authority really resides at the Diocesan level in the Episcopal Church, and not at the national level. So what the people and the Bishop do in New Hampshire doesn't necessarily mean that's what we will do in Southern Ohio. I can still be obedient to THIS Bishop. I can still be obedient to the doctrine and discipline of the Episcopal Church as it was received, and I most certainly – first and foremost – can still be obedient and preach the Word of God from this pulpit.

Now, as long as I am Rector of this church, I am given the authority, under the Bishop, to determine what rites and ceremonies take place; there will be nothing of blessing of same-sex relationships. Not because I believe those persons who feel that that should

happen are any much less Christian than I am or any graver sinner than I am, but I must hold the standard of Scripture, and I have searched the Scriptures high and low; I have read countless numbers of Biblical experts on both sides and I cannot in my heart of hearts, justify this decision of General Convention.

I am assured that there is still a place for me in this church, and for all that feel the way that I do. Let us heed the words of the Scripture today that we treat one another in the name of Jesus Christ, with love and compassion. That we are not faithless, heartless and ruthless. But, at the same time, we must stand on the authority of Scripture and worship the Creator, and not the images of creation. Amen.