

An Unworkable Theology

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It is increasingly difficult to escape the fact that mainline Protestantism is in a state of disintegration. As attendance declines, internal divisions increase. Take, for instance, the situation of the Episcopal Church in the United States. The Episcopal Church's problem is far more theological than it is moral—a theological poverty that is truly monumental and that stands behind the moral missteps recently taken by its governing bodies.

Every denomination has its theological articles and books of theology, its liturgies and confessional statements. Nonetheless, the contents of these documents do not necessarily control what we might call the “working theology” of a church. To find the working theology of a church one must review the resolutions passed at official gatherings and listen to what clergy say Sunday by Sunday from the pulpit. One must listen to the conversations that occur at clergy gatherings—and hear the advice clergy give troubled parishioners. The working theology of a church is, in short, best determined by becoming what social anthropologists call a “participant observer.”

For thirty-five years, I have been such a participant observer in the Episcopal Church. After ten years as a missionary in Uganda, I returned to this country and began graduate work in Christian Ethics with Paul Ramsey at Princeton University. Three years later I took up a post at the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest. Full of excitement, I listened to my first student sermon—only to be taken aback by its vacuity. The student began with the wonderful question, “What is the Christian Gospel?” But his answer, through the course of an entire sermon, was merely: “God is love. God loves us. We, therefore, ought to love one another.” I waited in vain for some word about the saving power of Christ's cross or the declaration of God's victory in Christ's resurrection. I waited in vain for a promise of the Holy Spirit. I waited in vain also for an admonition to wait patiently and faithfully for the Lord's return. I waited in vain for a call to repentance and amendment of life in accord with the pattern of Christ's life.

The contents of the preaching I had heard for a decade from the pulpits of the Anglican Church of Uganda (and from other Christians throughout the continent of Africa) was simply not to be found. One could, of course, dismiss this instance of vacuous preaching as simply another example of the painful inadequacy of the preaching of most seminarians; but, over the years, I have heard the same sermon preached from pulpit after

pulpit by experienced priests. The Episcopal sermon, at its most fulsome, begins with a statement to the effect that the incarnation is to be understood as merely a manifestation of divine love. From this starting point, several conclusions are drawn. The first is that God is love pure and simple. Thus, one is to see in Christ's death no judgment upon the human condition. Rather, one is to see an affirmation of creation and the persons we are. The life and death of Jesus reveal the fact that God accepts and affirms us.

From this revelation, we can draw a further conclusion: God wants us to love one another, and such love requires of us both acceptance and affirmation of the other. From this point we can derive yet another: Accepting love requires a form of justice that is inclusive of all people, particularly those who in some way have been marginalized by oppressive social practice. The mission of the Church is, therefore, to see that those who have been rejected are included—for justice as inclusion defines public policy. The result is a practical equivalence between the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and a particular form of social justice.

For those who view the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops and its General Convention from the outside, many of their recent actions may seem to represent a denial of something fundamental to the Christian way of life. But for many inside the Episcopal Church, the equation of the Gospel and social justice constitutes a primary expression of Christian truth. This isn't an ethical divide about the rightness or wrongness of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. It's a theological chasm—one that separates those who hold a theology of divine *acceptance* from those who hold a theology of divine *redemption*.

Look, for example, at the increasingly common practice of inviting non-baptized persons to share in the Holy Eucharist. The invitation is given in the name of "radical hospitality." It is like having a guest at the family meal, so its advocates claim: it is a way to invite people in and evangelize.

Within the Episcopal Church, a sure test of whether an idea is gaining favor is the appearance of a question about it on the general-ordination exam. Questions on divorce and remarriage, the ordination of women, sexual behavior, and abortion all preceded changes in the Episcopal Church's teaching and practice. On a recent version of the exam, there appeared a question about "open communion for the non-baptized," which suggests that this is far more than a cloud on the horizon. It is, rather, a change in doctrine and practice that is fast becoming well established and perhaps should be of greater concern to the Anglican Communion's ecumenical partners than the recent changes in moral teaching and practice.

Indeed, it is important to note when examining the working theology of the Episcopal Church that changes in belief and practice within the church are not made after prolonged investigation and theological debate. Rather, they are made by "prophetic actions" that give expression to the doctrine of radical inclusion. Such actions have become common partly because they carry no cost. Since the struggle over the ordination of women, the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops has given up any attempt to act as a unified body

or to discipline its membership. Within a given diocese, almost any change in belief and practice can occur without penalty.

Certain justifications are commonly named for such failure of discipline. The first is the claim of the prophet's mantle by the innovators—often quickly followed by an assertion that the Holy Spirit Itself is doing this new thing, which need have no perceivable link to the past practice of the church. Backed by claims of prophetic and Spirit-filled insight, each diocese can then justify its action as a “local option,” which is the claimed right of each diocese or parish to go its own way if there seem to be strong enough internal reasons to do so.

All of these justifications are currently being offered for the practice of open communion—which is the clearest possible signal that it is an idea whose time has come in the Episcopal Church. But the deep roots of the idea are in the doctrine of radical inclusion. Once we have reduced the significance of Christ's resurrection and downplayed holiness of life as a fundamental marker of Christian identity, the notion of radical inclusion produces the view that one need not come to the Father through the Son. Christ is *a* way, but not *the* way. The Holy Eucharist is a sign of acceptance on the part of God and God's people, and so should be open to all—the invitation unaccompanied by a call to repentance and amendment of life.

This unofficial doctrine of radical inclusion, which is now the working theology of the Episcopal Church, plays out in two directions. In respect to God, it produces a quasi-deist theology that posits a benevolent God who favors love and justice as inclusion but acts neither to save us from our sins nor to raise us to new life after the pattern of Christ. In respect to human beings, it produces an ethic of tolerant affirmation that carries with it no call to conversion and radical holiness.

The Episcopal Church's working theology is also congruent with a form of pastoral care designed to help people affirm themselves, face their difficulties, and adjust successfully to their particular circumstances. The primary (though not the sole) pastoral formation offered to the Episcopal Church's prospective clergy has for a number of years been “Clinical Pastoral Education,” which takes the form of an internship at a hospital or some other care-giving institution. The focus tends to be the expressed needs of a “client,” the attitudes and contributions of a “counselor,” and the transference and countertransference that define their relationship. In its early days, the supervisors of Clinical Pastoral Education were heavily influenced by the client-centered therapy of Carl Rogers, but the theoretical framework employed today varies widely. A dominant assumption in all forms, however, is that the clients have, within themselves, the answer to their perplexities and conflicts. Access to personal resources and successful adjustment are what the pastor is to seek when offering pastoral care.

There may be some merit in putting new clergy in hospital settings, but this particular form does not lend itself easily to the sort of meeting with Christ that leads to faith, forgiveness, judgment, repentance, and amendment of life. The sort of confrontation often necessary to spark such a process is decidedly frowned upon. The theological

stance associated with Clinical Pastoral Education is not one of challenge but one in which God is depicted as an accepting presence—not unlike that of the therapist or pastor.

But this should not be an unexpected development. In a theology dominated by radical inclusion, terms such as “faith,” “justification,” “repentance,” and “holiness of life” seem to belong to an antique vocabulary that must be outgrown or reinterpreted. So also does the notion that the Church is a community elected by God for the particular purpose of bearing witness to the saving event of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.

It is this witness that defines the great tradition of the Church, but a theology of radical inclusion must trim such robust belief. To be true to itself it can find room for only one sort of witness: inclusion of the previously excluded. God has already included everybody, and now we ought to do the same. Salvation cannot be the issue. The theology of radical inclusion, as preached and practiced within the Episcopal Church, must define the central issue as moral rather than religious, since exclusion is in the end a moral issue even for God.

We must say this clearly: The Episcopal Church’s current working theology depends upon the obliteration of God’s difficult, redemptive love in the name of a new revelation. The message, even when it comes from the mouths of its more sophisticated exponents, amounts to inclusion *without qualification*.

Thinking back over my thirty-five years in the Episcopal Church, I was distressed to realize that this new revelation is little different from the basic message communicated to me during the course of my own theological education. Fortunately, in my case God provided an intervening event. I lived for about ten years among the Baganda, a people who dwell on the north shore of Lake Victoria. The Baganda have a proverb which, roughly translated, says, “A person who never travels always praises his own mother’s cooking.” Travel allowed me to taste something different. It was not until I had spent a long time abroad that I realized how far apart the American Episcopal Church stood from the basic content of “Nicene Christianity,” with its thick description of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, its richly developed Christology, and its compelling account of Christ’s call to holiness of life.

The future of Anglicanism as a communion of churches may depend upon the American Episcopal Church’s ability to find a way out of the terrible constraints forced upon it by its working theology. Much of the Anglican communion in Africa sees the problem. Can the Americans? It is not enough simply to refer to the Episcopal Church’s Book of Common Prayer and reply, “We are orthodox just like you: we affirm the two testaments as the word of God, we recite the classical creeds in our worship, we celebrate the dominical sacraments, and we hold to episcopal order.” The challenge now being put to the Episcopal Church in the United States (and, by implication, to all liberal Protestantism) is not about official documents. It is about the church’s working theology—one which most Anglicans in the rest of the world no longer recognize as Christian.

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