

BUCKING PRECEDENT

Schismatics' grounds for objection fall short

By Randall Balmer, February 13, 2009

"Those who cannot remember the past," George Santayana once noted, "are condemned to repeat it."

These words came to mind when I read about the unfortunate decision of conservative bishops to break with the Episcopal Church and form their own group, which they are calling the "Anglican Church in North America." The actions of the schismatics are eerily reminiscent of the decision by antebellum Southerners to break with their Northern coreligionists over the issue of slavery.

The formation of this "Anglican Church in North America," as widely noted, marks the first time in the history of the Anglican Communion that a group has sought to define itself in terms of theological orientation rather than geography. In so doing, the conservatives are playing fast and loose with both tradition and the canons – something that the conservatives, paradoxically, have faulted the Episcopal Church for doing in the elevation of Gene Robinson to be bishop of New Hampshire in 2003.

But, apparently, when these conservatives engage in such irregularity, it's acceptable.

"We're going through Reformation times, and in Reformation times things aren't neat and clean," Robert Duncan, the deposed Episcopal bishop of Pittsburgh, said in a news story. "In Reformation times, new structures are emerging."

Luther's Protestant Reformation evolved out of principled grievances with the Roman Catholic Church: simony (buying and selling of church offices), widespread corruption and theological aberrations, such as the selling of indulgences, that compromised the gospel.

The search for high ground on the part of the conservative schismatics, however, is rather more complicated. Their principal grievance appears to be the elevation of Robinson, an openly gay man, as bishop -- and I have to believe that the adverb "openly" is pretty central to this discussion.

But on what basis do they make their objection? On procedure? That's a tough sell for a movement willing to violate ecclesiastical procedures in setting up their alternative province.

Luther based his Reformation on Scripture. Here, once again, the schismatics fall short. Jesus himself said nothing whatsoever about homosexuality, although he did affirm the religious laws set out in the book of Leviticus. But if that is the redoubt for the conservatives, they would be obliged to observe and enforce the other Levitical proscriptions as well – beginning, I suppose, with the fabric content of the purple shirts they're wearing! One of the Levitical proscriptions warns against wearing garments of mixed fabric.

If the conservatives truly wanted to "prooftext" their case against Gene Robinson, they should quote Titus 1:6, where St. Paul mandated that church leaders should be "the husband of one wife." Gene Robinson, a divorced man, presumably would not qualify (nor would some other bishops). Jesus, after all, said nothing explicit about homosexuality; he did, however, have something to say about divorce -- and none of it good.

Having struck out with both procedure and Scripture, the schismatics are left only with tradition. This is not a negligible argument; we Episcopalians defer to tradition, and properly so.

But tradition must not become a shackle and thereby inhibit new understandings of the gospel, the "good news." Surely the Southern segregationists had "tradition" on their side, and they could marshal prooftexts from the Bible to buttress their position.

But Christians eventually came to see that slavery and segregation -- in spite of those prooftexts -- violated the larger mandate of love that permeates the New Testament.

A couple of years ago, when I was writing *Thy Kingdom Come*, a book about the religious right, I sat in on a meeting of conservative church leaders from all of the mainline Protestant denominations (including the Episcopal Church). All of them were in a lather over the ordination of gays and lesbians in their respective denominations and over the ecclesiastical blessing of same-sex unions.

Toward the end of the gathering, I asked if I could pose a question.

"How many people around this conference table," I asked, "have a biblical or theological objection to the ordination of women?" They looked at one another and finally one person out of 20 (an Episcopal woman, in fact) raised her hand.

Why did I pose that question, they wondered. I replied that I had a fairly good idea that if this group had been meeting 20 or 30 years earlier, each of them would be quoting Scripture to justify his or her opposition to the ordination of women. And what I was trying to get at, of course, is the historical contingency of biblical interpretation.

What worries me, I said to this group of conservatives, is that if I had been alive 60 or 160 years ago, would I be sitting at this conference table quoting Scripture to justify my support for segregation or slavery?

A long silence ensued. Finally, one of the participants said brusquely, "Well, this is different!"

"Okay, how is it different?" I asked.

Another long silence. "It's just different!"

History, in my judgment, will not look kindly on these schismatics.

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