

## A Failure to Communicate? Bible Talk Among Anglican Christians

In a recent issue of *The Living Church*, a magazine of the Episcopal Church, the Rev. Tad de Bordenave published a column in which he lamented the failure of Bishop Gene Robinson's supporters to understand the position of those opposed to Bishop Robinson's ordination. He complains, for example, that his position is simply dismissed as being "fundamentalist, reactionary and homophobic" rather than understood as deriving from a deep commitment to the Bible as the "infallible, authoritative word of God."

De Bordenave illustrates his plea for understanding by citing the experience of loss he has heard about among Anglican Christians in Africa, who fear "losing the Bible," and from the underground church in China, whose pastors and members have sacrificed a great deal for the sake of even having a text of the Bible. De Bordenave cites these anecdotes and compares them to the approval of Bishop Robinson's ordination as evidence of how the Episcopal Church in the U.S. has virtually abandoned the Bible and the authority of scripture; as evidence of how the Episcopal Church has acquiesced to the pressures of a secularist culture; of how the supporters of Bishop Robinson have failed to understand the power of the Bible to transform lives.

In the response to De Bordenave's column that follows, Jay Johnson tries to modify De Bordenave's characterization of the problem. Rather than simply a failure to communicate or a failure to understand the opposition's position, supporters of Bishop Robinson fail to understand why De Bordenave's position reflects historic Anglican approaches to Christian faith and theology. The question here turns not merely on how the Bible is read, but on how to understand the role the Bible ought to play in the practice of Christian faith.

## Anglican Christians and Scripture: Discerning a Faithful Approach to Disagreement

A response to the Rev. Tad de Bordenave

By the Rev'd Jay Emerson Johnson

I am grateful to the Rev. Tad de Bordenave for his recent article in the Living Church about the ongoing controversy over the episcopate of V. Gene Robinson. I believe he has identified clearly why this controversy continues to create significant friction in some parts of the Anglican Communion. I do, however, want to suggest a slight modification to the reason he proposes for the severity of the situation. De Bordenave believes that those of us who support Bishop Robinson's election and ordination fail to understand the position of the opposition. To the contrary, many of us understand that position quite well indeed; we simply do not understand why that position reflects an Anglican approach to Christian faith and theology.

By suggesting this modification to de Bordenave's observation, I do not mean there is only one "correct" way to be an Anglican Christian, nor do I wish to evoke some kind of liberal version of "Anglican orthodoxy." Precisely the opposite: Anglican traditions have always exhibited a variety of theological sensibilities and diverse forms of ecclesial relation. One of the strengths of Anglican Christianity has been the willingness to enact the kind of unity that does not reduce to uniformity. Anglicans do not simply embrace differences uncritically but instead acknowledge the developmental character of Christian theology, which has marked Christian traditions from the very beginning. In other words, Anglicans have historically recognized that people of faith can in fact disagree with each other.

Anglican traditions reflect the evolutionary character of Christian faith by engaging in the hard work of conversation and recognizing that truth emerges slowly and over time and is punctuated by moments of faithful disagreement. Anglicans have been remarkably willing to live with the untidy edges of this process by trusting that the communion into which the Holy Spirit continually leads the church is a gift of divine grace rather than a product of achieving perfect

agreement. Moreover, the history of Christian traditions generally and of Anglican communities in particular demonstrates how the sustained commitment to living with disagreements has been one of the key ways in which the Holy Spirit leads us into truth over time. That's one of the reasons why so many of us insist that women's ordination offers an apt analogy for the current sense of crisis in the Anglican Communion over Gene Robinson's ordination. And that's also why we are perplexed by the tone of the opposition, which seems to equate unity with uniformity and faithfulness with agreement. If some of us seemed naïve about the depth of opposition Bishop Robinson would provoke, that naïveté was simply the result of what we have come to expect from the untidy dynamics of Anglican Christianity.

De Bordenave also laments the characterizations of his position (which are often simply caricatures) as "right-wing, fundamentalist, literalist and reactionary." I likewise lament such epithets as unhelpful, especially when they reduce to *ad hominem* attacks. This is, however, a two-way street. Those of us who support Bishop Robinson's episcopate have not by definition abandoned the Bible, distorted tradition or acquiesced to a misguided secularist culture. People on both sides of this debate deserve more than caricatures; all of us deserve the presumption that our positions emerge from a genuine and sincere attempt to live faithfully.

To that end, I was deeply troubled by de Bordenave's implication that Christians in Africa and China exhibit a depth of faithfulness that we, as Bishop Robinson's supporters, have either abandoned or could not possibly understand. As a matter of fact, many of us who are lesbian and gay Christians also bear witness to the "truth and power and love of Jesus Christ" as we have encountered it in scripture and as much as the "overseas leaders" de Bordenave cites. Many of us have also made significant sacrifices – whether in terms of careers, livelihood or relationships – for the sake of bearing witness to the power of the Gospel in our lives. We have often found ourselves ostracized by our faith communities on the one hand and scorned by gay and lesbian communities on the other. We are continually subject to misrepresentations and stereotypes from our brothers and sisters in Christ, some of which leave us vulnerable to violence and hate crimes in our cities and neighborhoods. We are variously portrayed as a "threat to the family," "enemies of the Gospel," "destroyers of marriage," and "blasphemers." Tragically, more than a few lesbian and

gay Christians have ended their lives in suicide rather than abandon their Christian faith. Clearly, sacrificing for the Gospel takes many different forms. Still, the point here surely involves more than noting the cost of Christian faithfulness or comparing moments of sacrifice. After all, just because someone sacrifices for a cause does not automatically make that cause worthy of pursuit.

Referencing a given community's grief over the prospect of "losing the Bible" does not constitute an argument for biblical authority. Suggesting that one community values the Bible more than another because that community has supposedly sacrificed more to preserve it is even more problematic. De Bordenave's description of the Robinson opposition, like many other similar accounts, leaves virtually untouched the heart of the issue here: How do Anglicans understand biblical authority and what role does such authority play in Christian faith and theology? Merely asserting that the Bible is the "infallible, authoritative Word of God" has never sufficed as an answer to that question in historical Anglican traditions. In fact, Anglicans have historically rejected that answer, not because the Bible is unimportant but precisely because its importance deserves a richer and more deeply textured treatment than that assertion can provide.

Given the historical treatment of scripture in Anglican contexts, many of us are indeed perplexed by the shape this debate has taken. It would seem to present only two options: 1) taking the Bible seriously (opponents of the Robinson election and consecration); or 2) abandoning the Bible (supporters of Bishop Robinson). Given these options, it is not so surprising that some on both sides of this issue resort to the convenience of labels rather than engaging in serious debate. I find it difficult to imagine how anyone can read the essays, articles, books and educational materials produced by Bishop Robinson's supporters and conclude that none of us takes the Bible seriously. To reach such a conclusion one would need to presume that there is only one true, correct and faithful way to read the Bible. Many of us are genuinely perplexed by that presumption; it bears virtually no resemblance to the historical development of Anglican Christianity.

Personally, I know very well the position de Bordenave describes and wishes to promote. I understand it inside and out. I lived and breathed it for the first twenty-three years of my life before becoming an Episcopalian. This does not mean, however, that by embracing an

Anglican approach to Christian faith and theology I thereby abandoned the importance of scripture. To the contrary, I was relieved and invigorated to discover that scripture retains its integrity under the scrutiny of reason. More than that, the Bible's life-transforming insights are actually enhanced by bringing those texts more fully into conversation with contemporary sensibilities, including those formed by historical-critical method, the social and empirical sciences, and the lived experiences of faith communities. This ongoing scrutiny of scripture in biblical interpretation and exegesis takes the Bible more not less seriously than simply asserting its "infallibility." By taking this approach, Anglican Christians expect encounters with God today to be just as surprising and insightful as the encounters recorded by the biblical writers. Rather than eviscerating biblical authority, this Anglican approach to reading scripture liberates biblical texts from their original cultural settings for the sake of an evolving and therefore living and dynamic faith tradition. For many of us, these Anglican sensibilities made the debate in Minneapolis last summer seem quite strange.

Like de Bordenave, I too was distressed by the proceedings of the 74<sup>th</sup> General Convention of ECUSA but for slightly different reasons. I was astonished to hear those opposed to Bishop Robinson's election quote the now classic passages of scripture that supposedly condemn same-gender relationships. I certainly believe scripture ought to be consulted, cited and employed in such deliberations. Those particular passages, however, were cited without any reference to the biblical scholarship that has transpired over the last fifty years regarding those passages. The level of debate and conversation at Convention seemed to be starting from scratch as if there had been no previous study undertaken about human sexuality and the Bible; as if the many task forces and commissions on human sexuality had never taken place; as if the curricular and educational materials on sexuality and theology had never been written (or read); as if the idea of lesbian and gay people in the church and among the ordained was a sudden innovation. Quite frankly, as a first-time Convention attendee, I expected a deeper level of engagement from delegates to such an august gathering and de Bordenave is quite correct: I fail to understand why that was not so.

Responding adequately to de Bordenave's appeal for understanding lies well beyond the scope of these brief observations, especially since his comments deal with the complex theological

relationship between divine revelation and biblical texts. But I do hope the days ahead will present opportunities for genuine conversation on these issues from which all of us can continue to learn. One's own limited frame of reference is never adequate for discerning divine guidance in the body of Christ and I need continually to learn from a wide range of perspectives and insights. It seems to me that such faithful conversation will necessarily involve several key questions of the following types.

- *How do biblical texts bear witness to divine revelation?* The biblical writers themselves insist on understanding God's revelation to reside primarily in the person of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit. The texts they wrote bear witness to that revelation but are not the revelation itself. This perspective was enshrined in centuries of catholic tradition and reaffirmed in the sixteenth-century English reformation. Divine revelation is by necessity filtered through limited human and cultural frames of reference, which is surely part of the point of the Incarnation: God reveals God's own self in a particular time and place. How do we discern divine revelation from those texts today?
- *What role does interpretation play in hearing the Word of God?* When God chose to reveal God's own self in a particularly definitive way, God did not send a text but a person, Jesus of Nazareth. The texts about that revelation were written in a language and with cultural idioms far removed from our own. Every act of translating those texts into English is already an act of interpretation. Hearing the Word today involves prayerful and deliberate interpretation of those texts in communities of faith where the Spirit will continue to lead us into truth. What contribution do the experiences of faithful Christians make to biblical interpretation?
- *Where do we discern the operations of divine inspiration?* Both writing and reading biblical texts involves divine inspiration, which also includes the process of choosing particular texts for the canon of scripture. Early Christian communities lived without any officially recognized canon of scripture for more than three centuries and then engaged in vigorous arguments over which texts ought to be included in such a canon. Divine inspiration seems to operate at many different levels and across time and place. Where does such inspiration operate today and how do we discern its leadings?

- *Why is human sexuality the exception to the rule of biblical interpretation?* Anglican Christians, among others, recognize the inevitability of disagreements in biblical interpretation and acknowledge that our understanding of biblical guidance changes over time, whether with reference to ancient Israelite polygamy, the role of women in church and society or on questions of slavery. Yet for many decades now, issues concerning human sexuality seem to be the exception to how Anglicans approach scripture on other issues. Merely asserting its exceptional character is not an argument. Why is the Bible understood differently when dealing with sexuality?

If those of us who support Bishop Robinson's episcopate suffer from a failure to understand the opposition, that failure springs from the fact that these and other similar questions remain untouched in the position de Bordenave describes. Quite simply, we don't understand why that would be the case in the context of Anglican Christianity.

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