

**FAITHFUL EVOLUTION:**  
The Dynamic Character of Christian Theology  
in Anglican Traditions

Prepared for and Submitted to  
The Lambeth Commission on Communion  
for Consideration in Matters Pertaining to  
Human Sexuality and Church Order

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# **FAITHFUL EVOLUTION:**

## The Dynamic Character of Christian Theology in Anglican Traditions

### **ABSTRACT**

*Anglican traditions reflect the dynamic and developmental character of Christian theology. The faithful evolution of Christian thought and practice has always posed challenges to church order and has invited ongoing reflection on the nature of authority and communion in Christianity. The diversity of opinion regarding human sexuality has been operating in a number of faith communities for many decades and has now sparked a sense of crisis within the Anglican Communion regarding Anglican approaches to both theology and church order. Addressing this crisis adequately involves placing questions of church order firmly in the context of sustained theological reflection and not only with reference to the proper execution of canon law. Anglicans have always understood ecclesial authority to derive primarily from the Eucharist and the hope of communion the Eucharist enacts. This essay seeks to place contemporary questions of church order within the context of that particularly Anglican approach and to argue that proposals for “alternative episcopal oversight” as a solution to the crisis over human sexuality represent a significant theological mistake. Such proposals indicate not only a departure from Anglican traditions; they also fall short of the Trinitarian theological insights that have shaped those traditions.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The task undertaken by the Lambeth Commission on Communion regarding the ordination of V. Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire and the decision of the Diocese of New Westminster to bless same-gender unions is clearly rooted in issues concerning church order. For Anglicans, these issues involve how notions of “authority and communion” operate in relation to Christian unity and with reference especially to canon law and the problems posed by “autonomous action.” Some of the questions the Commission has articulated for its work invite specifically theological responses and it is to that invitation that I want to devote these observations. Dealing theologically with these issues is of utmost importance; matters regarding church unity, especially among the loosely federated provinces of the Anglican Communion, receive their significance from the theological convictions to which the particularities of canon law try to bear witness. Moreover, abstracting such notions as “alternative episcopal oversight” and “impaired communion” from sustained theological reflection threatens the effectiveness of Christian witness to the good news of the Gospel.

Historically, Anglican traditions have exhibited a fluid and dynamic approach to Christian theology and ethics, which has shaped a particular understanding of church order. Rather than constructing a theological system, whether from confessional statements or based on a philosophical school of thought, Anglicans typically draw from the full breadth of Christianity's historical development to address particular issues and challenges in the practice of Christian faith. This approach places questions of church order firmly in the context of an ongoing exchange between theological traditions and the faithful practices of Christian communities, which the Episcopal Church in the United States (ECUSA) has embraced in ways both similar to and different from other provinces in the Anglican Communion. In this sense, and as I hope this essay will help to demonstrate, recent developments in both ECUSA and the Diocese of New Westminster do not represent a departure from Anglican sensibilities but instead reflect how Anglicans have always gone about the business of relating theological insights to the practical realities of Christian living and, likewise, of incorporating the experiences of faithful Christians into the ongoing development of theological ideas.<sup>1</sup>

Anglicans did not invent this approach to Christian theology. Dynamic interactions among multiple traditions, diverse practices and cultural developments have marked Christianity from the beginning and are evident in the biblical texts themselves, in terms of both the content of Christian scriptures and the process of choosing among those various texts for constructing the canon of scripture centuries after those texts were written. These dynamic interactions have endowed Christianity with a developmental and evolutionary character as each new generation of the church faces the challenge of remaining faithful to historical traditions while addressing the peculiarities of its own time and place. Sixteenth-century English reformers confronted that challenge in a particular way by trying to chart a course that neither acquiesced to the Pope's authority nor abandoned the insights from centuries of theological reflection. Rather than an entirely new approach to Christian faith, the English Reformation made the evolutionary character of Christian traditions more explicit, which in turn highlighted unresolved questions about the nature of authority in Christianity and how properly to shape the functions of church order for the sake of fostering Christian unity.

For Anglican Christians, the ongoing and mutually affecting exchange between theological texts and ethical practices transpiring in a community of faithful inquiry provides the only appropriate context for dealing with potentially divisive points of disagreement, including the diversity of opinion concerning human sexuality. Theologically speaking, the process of dealing with the vexing questions posed to church order by the diversity of sexual practices ought not to proceed in a way that is fundamentally different from how other similarly vexing questions have been addressed in the past, such as those posed by the institution of slavery and the ordination of women as priests and bishops. Unfortunately, most of the objections to the actions taken by ECUSA and the Diocese of New Westminster treat decisions about sexuality as the *exception* to how

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<sup>1</sup> None of this is to say that Anglicans never engage in more typically systematic approaches to faith and practice. From Richard Hooker in the sixteenth century to John Macquarrie in the twentieth, as well as contemporary figures such as Mark McIntosh and Rowan Williams, more typically systematic constructions of theological ideas do occasionally appear in Anglican contexts, and often quite fruitfully. Yet even then, these theological constructions do not usually appeal either to traditional systematic foundations (such as Thomistic thought in Roman Catholicism) or to commonly shared confessional statements (such as the Augsburg Confession in Lutheranism). Even Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* is best understood as a systematic exposition of why the Church of England need not turn to theological systems for ordering its common life.

Anglicans engage in theological reflection on other issues. These objections usually offer no explicit rationale for the uniqueness of sexuality in ecclesial deliberations and the reasons implied by these objections bear virtually no resemblance to what can be considered historically “Anglican” in Christian theology.<sup>2</sup>

In the observations I offer here, I wish to place disagreements about human sexuality (and therefore church order) more firmly in the context of an Anglican approach to theology with respect first to questions of method and then to issues relating to authority. I will conclude with some theological reflections on human sexuality, not as an argument for the moral legitimacy of lesbian and gay relationships (which the Commission is not seeking to address at present) but as an illustration of what theological reflection on sexuality contributes to an Anglican understanding of church order, especially when considered with reference to Trinitarian Christian faith. Overall, I wish respectfully to invite the Commission to consider the decisions recently made by ECUSA and the Diocese of New Westminster, not as unilateral departures from Anglican Christianity but as part of the faithful evolution of Christianity, which Anglican traditions have typically embraced ever since the sixteenth century Elizabethan Settlement.

## I.

### AN ANGLICAN APPROACH TO THEOLOGICAL METHOD

The discipline of theology does not make God the object of human study. Rather, theologians seek to notice and interpret both historical and contemporary encounters with God in all their various forms and modes. A theological text is therefore not God, nor even an encounter with God, but reflection on God’s interactions and relationships with human beings and the whole of God’s creation. Just as a love sonnet might evoke and inspire love but is not the love itself, theology is always at least one step removed from the encounter it seeks to describe and will always fall short of articulating the meaning of that encounter with precision. Developing and utilizing a method for theological reflection thus presents a challenge in discerning how the Creator relates to creatures, or how the Infinite interacts with the finite. To put this in another way, one of the fundamental issues in theological method involves divine revelation and considerations of how such revelation is by necessity filtered through layers of cultural and historical frames of reference.

Christian communities have always relied on the same basic tools for theological method even as they have employed them in a variety of ways over time: the texts of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures; the development of tradition; and the insights of human reason and experience. The English Reformation set in motion a particular way of employing those tools for an Anglican approach to theological method. Most Anglicans know the classic touchstones of that method well enough to admire them: the *via media*, or middle way between Protestantism and Catholicism; the balanced “three-legged stool” of scripture, tradition, and reason; and the unifying

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<sup>2</sup> Biblical arguments continue to be made for treating sexuality as distinct from issues relating to slavery and the role of women, as in Robert A. J. Gagnon’s *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001). Gagnon, however, like many others, restricts the bulk of his argument to intra-biblical interpretation (with virtually no reference to the complexities of the ecclesial process of canonization) and relies heavily on both historical silence and textual infrequency to render sexual morality unique (see especially 441-43). More to the point, perpetual contestations about biblical texts leave untouched some of the critical questions about theological method and the role of Scripture in Anglican approaches to theology.

symbol of the Book of Common Prayer. Over time, however, this method has posed as many questions as answers for Anglican communities. How do we know when we have drifted into one of the extremes rather than navigating the “middle way”? When will one of the “legs” of our stool become too short, making us list or wobble when we try to sit on it? Can the Prayer Book provide unity when it remains vulnerable to constant revision and our liturgical language seems so unstable?

Questions such as these have nurtured not just one but a variety of theological perspectives in the Anglican Communion, ranging from Evangelical “low church” sensibilities to Catholic “high church” formulations and the broad space in between. But the lack of just one “Anglican theology” does not render Anglican theological method incoherent by definition. After all, the Christian Scriptures retain their coherence even though they include four distinct gospels and varying theological approaches in the epistles. Generally speaking, Anglicans have resisted the temptation to force multiple biblical perspectives into a single system. Recognizing that the Bible itself contains a range of perspectives can soothe some of the anxiety our own diversity generates today. Seeking insights from multiple sources and allowing space for a range of approaches endows Anglican Christianity with a fluid rather than static or rigid coherence, which reflects the way in which historical Christian traditions developed over time.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple insisted on listening to every theological voice, arguing that we cannot afford to reject any of them. Truth, Temple recognized, cannot be captured in a single system but will emerge only in a concert of voices and in the ongoing struggle to create harmonious chords from their singing. In John’s gospel, Jesus tried to prepare his disciples for precisely this kind of challenge. “I still have many things to say to you,” he says, “but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth...and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (16:12-13). Notably, Jesus does not give his disciples a timetable in this or any other passage from the gospels. Each of the New Testament writers seems to acknowledge that this ongoing journey into theological truth has only just begun. Even after Pentecost, when the “Spirit of truth” moved dramatically and explicitly in and among the disciples (Acts 2:1-13), those early Christian communities kept lurching their way toward truth, struggling to discern exactly where and how God was leading them. These biblical authors, each in his own way, evoke an ancient insight about God of the sort found in Isaiah: “Thus says the Lord,” Isaiah writes, “I am about to do a new thing...do you not perceive it?” (42:19). And again, “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth” (65:17). These images are repeated in the Christian Scriptures as well, as in the Revelation to John: “And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new’” (21:5).

Historically, Anglican theologians have taken these images and claims to heart, not by abandoning the past, nor by trying to preserve theological traditions in their original or “pristine” condition. Rather, Anglicans take historical traditions seriously by bringing them into creative conversation with the new things God is perpetually bringing about. Relying on theological systems can take us only so far in the evolutionary journey into truth, which Matthew’s Jesus tries to describe with the image of a wise householder. Every scribe trained in the things of God, Jesus says to his disciples, is like a householder who brings out of the treasure chest that which is both old and new (13:52).

Anglicans have likewise recognized – though not without considerable consternation at times – just how untidy and tenuous this kind of theological work can be. It is not always clear how

the past ought to inform the present. Embracing the new things God brings about can call various aspects of theological traditions into question, even some of the most cherished moments of religious history. Matthew's Jesus tried to prepare his listeners for this as well by reminding them what can happen when new wine is poured into old wineskins; before long the old skins will burst (9:17). The long history of Christian traditions exhibits this ongoing and dynamic tension between past and present, which never quite resolves itself as communities of faithful inquiry seek to respond to their encounters with the God who continually makes all things new. In Anglican contexts, responses to those encounters inevitably pose serious questions about autonomy, especially in relation to theological convictions about communion. Rather than resolving the tension in that relation, Anglicans instead rely on a posture of humility toward the faithful evolution of Christian thought and practice, which an Anglican approach to theological method inspires and shapes.

### *1. Christian Autonomy*

At its root, autonomy invokes a sense of self-governing or being lawful unto one's self. This notion took on added texture and potency in the advent of modernity and the European Enlightenment when the rule of tradition was displaced by the rule of empirical reason and each individual was understood to have the capacity to think independently and was encouraged to do so, free from institutional imposition. Theologically, however, this eighteenth century emergence of Enlightenment rationalism and modern individualism represented a significant departure from how individual conscience functioned in catholic tradition.

Thomas Aquinas, for example, based his theological system on the inherent compatibility between faith and reason rooted in concepts of natural law. For Aquinas, an individual's access to a divinely ordered natural law, contrary to the modern notions of independence, requires formation in the sacramental context of the community of faith. Theological traditions and the sacraments, Aquinas argued, provide the means by which an individual-in-community hones and maintains the natural human orientation toward God and the Beatific Vision. Still, even given the high regard with which he treated the church, as a divine institution, Aquinas recognized the inevitable limits that come with the human aspects of that institution. The importance he afforded to natural law led him to acknowledge the possibility that individual conscience might at times conflict with institutional tradition. For Aquinas, neither institutional imposition nor individual independence suffices for addressing those moments of conflict. Only the commitment to sustained, sacramental participation within the community can resolve such conflict over time. As Catholic moral theologian Timothy E. O'Connell has noted, catholic tradition in no way conceives of Christian morality as a process of applying objective biblical principles to the particularities of a given situation. Christian ethics involves engaging in a process of shared inquiry in the context of the church's sacramental life and can yield only relative degrees of certainty.<sup>3</sup>

The sixteenth-century Church of England struggled to retain those Thomistic insights of catholic tradition that had been distorted by medieval institutional abuse and that stood at risk in the more radical reformation movements on the European continent. The Anglican approach to theological method that emerged from that struggle embraced the importance of Scripture by bringing those texts more explicitly into conversation with the religious and political issues those English reformers faced. This was quickly put to the test in the Puritan crisis the emerged soon

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<sup>3</sup> See Timothy E. O'Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality* (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1978), 199-208.

thereafter. The religious and civic tragedy of that crisis honed the Anglican approach to theological method even further. As Richard Hooker understood and tried to articulate in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, the “plain sense of Scripture” lauded by the Puritans ultimately fails to account for centuries of tradition and the operations of human reason that must inform the interpretative task of the church and on which Aquinas had relied so heavily. For Hooker (as well as Martin Luther and *contra* John Calvin), appeals for a *sola scriptura* approach to Christian faith can be made only with reference to divine salvation by grace; all else must be worked out in concert with historical traditions in light of contemporary reason.<sup>4</sup>

Thus for Anglicans, Christian autonomy, as opposed to modern autonomy, begins with the fact of a communally constructed identity from which notions of individuality subsequently derive, not the other way around. In catholic tradition, as both Aquinas and the English reformers recognized, this approach does not restrict in any absolute sense the operations of autonomous action nor does it foreclose the possibility of ongoing conflict within the bounds of faithfully and communally appropriated tradition. Instead, Christian autonomy is rooted in and oriented toward a communal embrace of that salvation which is not merely handed to us in a text or from an institution but must be continually worked out “in fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12).

## 2. *Christian Communion*

The role afforded to Christian autonomy in catholic tradition poses additional questions concerning the meaning of communion and being “in communion” with one another. The word communion is rooted in notions of holding and being held in common, evoking that which is shared across differences. This need not imply a reduction of that which is shared to the least common denominator. I hold a good number of things in common with my parents, not least among them is genetic material, but my life is also quite different from theirs. Communing with nature in my backyard garden discloses many aspects of life itself I hold in common with the plants and animals I find there, even though significant differences still obtain between us. “Communion” in these instances refers not to uniform correspondence but to identifying and nurturing various nodes of commonality, which applies just as well to religious and theological notions of communion.

The sixteenth-century Elizabethan Settlement, for example, managed to stitch together otherwise warring factions in English society, not by eliminating every trace of difference but by identifying significant points of contact, or linkages, within those differences sufficient for constructing a recognizable playing field on which to continue the process of “working out” Christian salvation. The primary tool for that settlement was the adoption of a book of common prayer, which did not limit the possibilities of diverse devotional practices or theological perspectives in any absolute sense but instead created the conditions for Christian autonomy to operate not only communally but also and especially prayerfully.

Communion in this sense refers to the process of recognizing within even significant differences the basis for a shared life, a life held in common. The primary point of reference for this process in Christian theology is the Eucharist, in which the absolute difference between Creator

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<sup>4</sup> It is precisely this approach to the limited role of Scripture as that which “contains all things necessary to salvation” (emphasis added) that became the basis for the “oath of conformity” enshrined in the ordinal of the Book of Common Prayer. See the ordination rites in *The Book of Common Prayer*, (according to the use of the Episcopal Church, 1979), 513, 527, and 538.

and creature, the divine and the human, the Infinite and the finite is bridged by means of common elements – bread and wine. The differences do not thereby disappear between God and humanity; they are instead forged into what can be shared across those differences for the sake of life. To be “in communion” with God, the hope for which is enacted around the Eucharistic table, reflects in the most profound way a common life emerging from and because of difference.

Many of the Apostle Paul’s letters are extended theological reflections on what this kind of communion means for the relationships it creates among those who enact it. For Paul, it meant nothing less than becoming the Body of Christ. Just like being in communion with God, being in communion with each other does not eliminate differences. The divine grace of communion in both cases emerges precisely from the realization that persistent differences do not foreclose the possibility of creating a life held in common and in fact contribute to the vitality of that common life. Paul understood that grace in organic terms, referring to the shared life created from difference as many parts of a body contributing to the life of that body as a whole, and each part, though significantly different, is needed for the whole body to function (I Corinthians 12:12-26). The head of this body is, of course, Christ himself (Ephesians 1:22-23).

To know the “mind of Christ,” the head of the body, as Paul encourages his readers to do (I Corinthians 2:16) presents a serious challenge for questions of church order today and especially with reference to notions of communion. Paul was not unfamiliar with this challenge and addressed it in slightly different ways in each of his letters. Still, any claim to know the mind of Christ with clarity, precision and exactitude would surely have struck even Paul as the height of hubris. Paul himself was vexed by the refusal on the part of some of his own brothers and sisters among the people of Israel to embrace the good news of Jesus, which he addressed at some length in his letter to the Romans. There he insists that God’s promises are indeed irrevocable, even when those promises are rejected by those to whom they are made. This represents a profound and inscrutable mystery in which we can only trust not our wisdom but God’s providence to achieve what God intends. After all, as Paul rhetorically asks, “who has known the mind of the Lord” (Romans 11:34)?

As members of the Body of Christ it behooves us to know, as best we can, the mind of Christ, who is the head of the body. How we go about the business of such knowing is a matter of theological method, a process Anglicans have insisted transpires slowly and over many generations and with tools shaped by particular cultures in particular times and places. An Anglican approach to theological method acknowledges the grace of communion by which we are made into the Body of Christ and, at the very same time, the differences of opinion in knowing the mind of Christ with clarity, which in no way obviates the grace of being in communion with each other, which comes only from God. While some have characterized this approach as “muddle-headed” (and undoubtedly this is the case at times), mostly it reflects a traditional and appropriate posture of humility toward the mystery of divine grace and in the face of which none of us should claim to be wiser than we are (Romans 11:25).

### ***3. Summary: Christian Humility***

Anglican approaches to theology have often been characterized by the dubious virtue of ambiguity. On a whole host of issues, however, Anglicans stake out positions that are far from ambiguous: Belief in God the Creator, who chose to dwell among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who remains with us in the grace of the Holy Spirit and who promises to bring all things

to their perfection in what Jesus called the “Kingdom of God.” It is precisely because of the conviction with which Anglicans hold these positions that we likewise insist on articulating them with humility. The profound mysteries of God-in-Christ and life in the Spirit do not call for the exactitude of certainty in our positions but instead urge humble invitations to explore.

By taking seriously the many biblical images of the new Creation, Anglicans understand the results of our theological method as always provisional and subject to the ongoing scrutiny inspired by insights gleaned from contemporary encounters with God. This does not mean that Anglicans never take a stand on issues. It does mean that our doctrinal formulations and ethical choices are always made with “eschatological reserve” as we recognize that the hope to which God has called us has not yet been fully revealed (Titus 2:13). As the long and tumultuous history of Christian traditions demonstrates, this gradual unfolding of theological insight can create moments of profound disagreement in which clarity of vision takes time to emerge. Even after some issues appear to be resolved, subsequent insights will sometimes call for additional evaluation and appropriate changes (as in the adjustments to Augustine’s neo-Platonism in Thomistic theology, for example, or the rejection of clerical celibacy in the Reformation, or the restoration of actually eating the bread of the Eucharist rather than merely looking at it). The institution of the church itself remains subject to perpetual reform in light of Christianity’s faithful evolution and as we seek to shape our common life with a view toward what God has yet to bring about and of which we have received at present only a glimpse. Or in the words of the Johannine writer, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed” (I John 3:2).

An Anglican approach to theological method resists treating any of the “legs” of our three-legged stool as a fixed or isolated source for theological insight. Only a more fluid understanding of these sources can account for surprising encounters with God. As bishop and theologian Arthur Vogel has noted, when dealing with scripture, tradition and reason we are not “dealing with three absolutes, three ingredients that stand outside each other and are only externally related.” To the contrary, these sources of insight “penetrate each other” in a tension both “open and dynamic.”<sup>5</sup> The kind of Christian humility this approach to theological method inspires raises additional questions about the nature of authority in Christianity and how Anglicans shape the operations of church order for the sake of Christian ministry and mission.

## II.

### AN ANGLICAN APPROACH TO THEOLOGICAL AUTHORITY

All three synoptic gospels include accounts of astonishment at Jesus’ teaching because he taught with “authority” (see, for example, Matthew 7:28, Mark 1:22, and Luke 4:32). Significantly, the astonishment in these encounters was expressed not over the authority of a text or an institution but of a *person*. These and similar passages can remind Christians that genuine authority resides only with God and in the revelation of God in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul, however, added his own astonishing claim to this understanding of authority. As already noted, throughout his letters he treats the Christian communities to which he writes as the Body of Christ, which suggests rather strongly that the authority of Jesus also resides, by the work of the Holy Spirit, with the *followers* of Jesus, a suggestion echoed in the gospel texts as well (for

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<sup>5</sup> Arthur Vogel, ed. *Theology in Anglicanism* (Wilton, Connecticut: Morehouse-Barlow, 1984), 8.

example, in Luke 9:1-2 and John 20:22-23). In this sense, and just like divine revelation, divine authority is by necessity filtered through many layers of cultural and historical frames of reference in the form of various texts, traditions, and communities.

No less than any other Christian community, Anglican Christians have struggled with the process of understanding how divine authority ought to be discerned and expressed. This process has taken on a variety of forms in Anglican traditions, yet Anglican Christians have never been comfortable with faith by decree, whether from a monarch or bishop. Anglican history certainly exhibits the attempt on occasion, whether with reference to English kings and queens or particularly strong-willed diocesan prelates. But the attempt always fails. Whether because of peculiar historical circumstances, creative personalities, divine inspiration, or a combination of all three, Anglican Christians have learned that neither morality nor theological insight can be legislated or coerced through the exercise of institutional authority. Truth never emerges all at once but only gradually and by drawing on the perspectives and experiences of a wide range of traditions and groups. For Anglicans, theological authority is shaped by a commitment to sustained interaction with faithful communities of conversation offered in the context of common prayer.

### *1. Conversation and Fallibility*

Throughout the historical deployments of Anglican theological method, Anglicans have understood texts, traditions and institutional structures (including canon law) as important but also limited expressions of genuine theological authority, which, by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, resides in the whole community as the Body of Christ. For this reason, Anglicans supplement the basic tools of theological method with a commitment to conversation and an acknowledgment of perpetual human fallibility.

Rather than systems of thought, Anglicans have historically relied on the lively art of conversation for teasing out theological insights. This doesn't make the work of theology any easier. In fact, and in some ways, it would be far easier to have theology handed down to us whole and complete in an established text from the hands of a recognized authority. This approach, however, rarely works in the more mundane aspects of human life and even less so in the complex and surprising human encounters with God. Given the limitations in perspective of each individual and every community, only a commitment to sustaining conversation will suffice in an evolving theological tradition. As most people realize, conversational exchanges are far from precise and a genuine conversation is never etched in stone. It relies on an open exchange of ideas, opinions, arguments, experiences, feelings, guesses, objections and proposals, and all for the sake of teasing out truth as best as we can perceive it. A genuine conversation, furthermore, always carries the potential for conversion. (Indeed, both of these words come from the same linguistic root.) Speaking the truth about our lives to each other invariably changes our perceptions and interpretations of reality, and not just once but continually.

Anglicans have likewise recognized that the ongoing work of conversion involves a continual acknowledgment of fallibility. This means that each of us, right now, is mistaken about something and has more to learn. Anglican Christians have been willing, often remarkably so, to understand that faithfulness is not synonymous with flawlessness. Our faithfulness as Christians does not depend on living a "mistake-free" life. Indeed, a deeper kind of faithfulness emerges when we realize we have been terribly mistaken about this or that aspect of our lives or of the world around us. Faith develops over time and is subject to the same kind of surprising course corrections

experienced in nearly every other aspect of human living. One of the challenges here, of course, is that nothing can prevent us from taking action more quickly than the anxiety over the possibility of being wrong. This is particularly true for religious convictions, in which human beings have invested a great deal for articulating the meaning of life itself. Again, appealing to divine revelation to ease our anxiety over fallibility ignores the extent to which such revelation is always by necessity filtered through complex layers of limited human perception and cultural assumptions. For this reason, Anglicans understand Christian communities as communities of interpretation, as locations not for disseminating already established dogma but for discerning how historical traditions offer assistance for our contemporary encounters with God.

## ***2. The Context of Common Prayer***

Anglicans believe that engaging in faithful conversation with other fallible human beings transpires best in the context of common prayer. This reflects an ancient insight that the primary “data” for theological reflection emerges from the worshipping community itself. Sharing prayer in common, however, is not necessarily uniform prayer. If we fuss with our liturgical texts from the desire to “get it right” or to ensure that everyone prays in exactly the same way, we have missed the point of true conversation and conversion. We also miss the same point when we try to create liturgies from scratch, as if the long and varied history of Christian prayer, stretching over many centuries, has no relevance for contemporary communities. Living in that intersection of historical traditions and contemporary experience will not generate “perfect” or unchangeable liturgies. It will, however, make for lively conversation, the possibility of conversion, and the conditions for discovering theological insights about the God who makes all things new.

The reliance on genuine conversation, the perpetual acknowledgement of fallibility, and prayer shared in common all contribute to the shape and function of theological authority in Anglican communities and they are particularly evident whenever Anglicans gather around the Eucharistic table, where we seek to be shaped by the story of God’s own self-giving in love. This divine offering of God’s own self does not depend on our response, our comprehension or our conduct of life. God perpetually offers God’s own self, whether or not we deserve such a gift, whether or not we embrace it with open arms, whether we wind up dancing gracefully to the music it inspires or stumble and fall flat on our faces. Any treatment of the Eucharist as either a “reward” for good behavior or as a litmus test for membership in a like-minded affinity group reflects a profound misunderstanding of this Eucharistic action. The Eucharist always points beyond itself to that heavenly banquet which is yet to come (Matthew 26:29). In this way, the Eucharist functions as a graced sign of the communion none of us has yet experienced in its fullness and inspires hope for that day when we shall all be one, just as Jesus and God are one (John 17:22).<sup>6</sup> Participating in this sacramental sign is an acknowledgement and therefore a communal expression of the hope for that communion which is at present incomplete.

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<sup>6</sup> Historically, and regarding the moral character of the ordained in Eucharistic settings, this view of Eucharistic grace and hope was enshrined in Christian traditions long ago through the resolutions hammered out in the Donatist controversy. To recall, the Donatists had laid claim to the title “catholic,” which they denied to everyone else by means of insisting that “unity and catholicity” were contingent upon the church’s prior and untainted holiness. Thus, for Donatists, the grace of the sacraments by which unity is expressed is vitiated if the administrator of the sacrament had fallen into serious sin. This view was vigorously repudiated by, among others, Augustine and officially rejected by the Council of Carthage in 411. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 308-312.

### *3. Summary: Eucharistic Authority*

Anglican Christians insist on locating genuine authority with God alone, which the church perceives and appropriates in the ongoing development of its theological ideas and institutional practices. The inevitable limits of human perception require a sustained commitment to conversation in the context of common prayer for discerning the providential guidance of divine authority in our midst. Anglicans turn to a variety of ecclesial locations for engaging in this kind of work, chief among them is the Eucharist, through which we offer ourselves to be shaped by the story of God's own self-giving in love. It is not through moral law or doctrinal insight but only in God's perpetual self-giving in love that we find the ultimate expression of divine authority. This approach cuts to the heart of the good news of the Gospel, which Jesus tried to articulate in the context of the final meal shared with his friends while they argued about which of them was the "greatest." Authority among the Gentiles, Jesus says in response, comes from lording it over others. "Not so with you," he says. "For the greatest among you must become...like one who serves" (Luke 22:24:26). Matthew and Mark put an even finer point on the same insight: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45). John makes the same point by shifting the focus of the Eucharist from a meal to the washing of feet, which places divine authority firmly in the context of self-giving service (13:1-17). Locating authority in the divine act of self-offering, which Christians enact in every Eucharist, shapes the good news of the Gospel in significantly counter-cultural ways and provides the means by which to evaluate the structures of our institutional church life in light of that good news.

The theological authority emerging from Eucharistic celebrations offers precisely the kind of good news a world of violent divisions longs to hear and which is seriously threatened by implementing procedures for "alternative episcopal oversight" and by invoking notions of "impaired" or "broken" communion. Relying solely on the provisions of canon law to determine what it means to be "in communion" with each other obscures the theological authority of the Eucharist itself and to which Anglicans have explicitly and consistently turned ever since the Elizabethan Settlement. But much more is at stake here than discerning how to apply canonical procedures to the relations among Anglican provinces. In a world where an increasing number of societies are deeply divided along lines of race, class and gender and suffer from centuries-long ethnically-based violence, the Christian Gospel is at risk of becoming irrelevant if "community" is reduced to "conformity." Christian history is, of course, replete with the attempt to do precisely that. Almost without fail, however, those attempts collapse and prompt movements of reform and renewal for the sake of expanding rather than restricting the reach of the Gospel.

An Anglican approach to theological method and an Anglican approach to theological authority are neither anomalous nor innovative in the history of Christian traditions. Instead, they reflect the faithful evolution of Christian faith and theology that has been transpiring ever since the gospel writers struggled to articulate how the Divine is encountered in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Historical theologian Rebecca Lyman reminds us that, "in our desire for unity or in our nostalgia for the past, we may forget that theological diversity is also part of the apostolic church." This was true not only for those tumultuous decades immediately following crucifixion and resurrection but also for the centuries that followed, when theological ideas supposedly became more settled and entrenched. "In spite of the sharp rhetorical categories of orthodoxy and heresy," Lyman goes on to note, "both negotiation and compromise were also part of historical catholicity in

the early church.”<sup>7</sup> Theological reflection on human sexuality illustrates this faithful evolution of Christian traditions and offers important insights into today’s questions about church order in the Anglican Communion.

### III. ANGLICAN THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON SEXUALITY AND CHURCH ORDER

Human sexuality is typically relegated to the realm of Christian morality and ethics. Church order is usually understood as dealing with the proper execution of the provisions of canon law. Both of these concerns, however, deserve broader treatment with reference to the theological traditions and insights that inform and shape them. To begin and to end only with ethical restrictions on appropriate sexual behavior is to miss a significant opportunity for reflecting on the rich intersections between sexuality and theological ideas in the same way that addressing questions of church order only with reference to canon law risks missing the theological insights to which the particularities of canon law ought to bear witness.

An Anglican approach to theology treats both human sexuality and church order as issues that invite the same kind of evaluation with respect to Christian conceptions of who God is and what kind of people those conceptions call us to be. That kind of theological evaluation transpires continually in the life of the church as the faithful evolution of Christian thought and practice presents new challenges and opportunities to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Ephesians 4:12-13). As elsewhere in the Scriptures, this passage from the letter to the Ephesians clearly invokes a process toward unity, not a reification of a unity that already exists. All of us are still journeying toward that “knowledge of the Son of God,” which theological reflection on both sexuality and church order can help us embrace more fully.

Addressing questions of human sexuality and of church order present a similar challenge in terms of form. Objections to lesbian and gay relationships frequently rely on arguments for biological complementarity, or the form of the bodies in question. Similarly, objections to the actions taken by ECUSA and the Diocese of New Westminster often turn to arguments about institutional church structures, or the form of church order. Both objections reflect an ancient quandary concerning the relationship between *form* and *content* and they imply that any adequate treatment of that relationship demands a necessary and strictly coherent correspondence between them.

Both Scripture and the many centuries of theological traditions suggest a more fluid and dynamic relationship between the form and content of Christian thought and practice. The ancient Christological hymn preserved in the Letter to the Philippians, for example, describes Jesus as being “in the form of God” but emptied of the divine content we might expect and, likewise, as “being found in human form,” God surprisingly exalts the content of his humanity to the end that “every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (2:6-11). The gospel writers illustrate a similar dynamic as they struggle to articulate how Jesus can be embraced as the long-expected

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<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Lyman, *Early Christian Traditions* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1999), 163.

Messiah when the content of his ministry seems at odds with ancient Israel's expected messianic form. As Jesus breaks the rules of traditional Sabbath observance and insists that "the Sabbath was made for humanity and not humanity for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27), the form of religious faith is clearly at the service of its content, not the other way around. In subsequent theological traditions, the dynamic relationship between form and content took on added complexity in the development of Christological and Trinitarian conceptualizations. Evocations of the Divine in the form of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" prompted a wide range of possibilities for reflecting on the content of God's life for us and with us. Reflecting on that content in turn inspired a variety of proposals for describing the form of this divine reality in new and expanding ways.

These theological reflections on the historical development of Christian faith carry significant implications for today's controversies over sexuality and church order. Those implications can only be outlined here and I respectfully commend them to the Commission for its consideration on these matters.

### ***1. Form and Content in Ecclesial Relations***

With reference to polity and church order, Anglicans have consistently and instinctively understood that the *form* of our ecclesial relations must serve their *content* and not the other way around. This insight has helped to fuel the journey along the Anglican *via media*, which tries to steer a middle way between the excessive centralization of church order evident in Roman Catholicism and the equally excessive autonomy of some Protestant forms of congregationalism. This middle way is best described as a "communion ecclesiology," wary of centralized authority yet committed to the organic relationality described by the Apostle Paul as the "Body of Christ." As each of Paul's letters demonstrates, a communion ecclesiology demands more not less diligence to maintain than either centralized institutional structures or autonomous congregations.<sup>8</sup>

Sixteenth-century English reformers confronted the challenges of a communion ecclesiology in new ways when Henry VIII severed his ties with Rome. In those early days, the form of the Church in England could no longer be considered Catholic apart from that form's defining figure – the Pope – even though the content of the English church still recognizably belonged to catholic tradition. Later, when the divide between Protestant and Catholic sensibilities grew more severe and threatened the civic order of England, the Elizabethan Settlement rooted the English church more securely in the Book of Common Prayer and parliamentary acts of conformity, the public forms of which left virtually untouched the content of individual conscience. The aftermath of the American Revolution created the conditions for further alterations in the Anglican form of ecclesial relations as Samuel Seabury, among others, faced the challenge of creating an institutional structure that was both consonant with the Church in England and responsive to a new political and cultural context. The American form of church that emerged from those efforts, including an American version of the Book of Common Prayer, gave shape to the international ecclesial relations that become known as the Anglican Communion. Since then, yet more versions of the Prayer Book have appeared in various provinces as the form of that unifying symbol continues to change for the sake of enacting its content more effectively in new cultural contexts. The Church of South India offers a particularly intriguing case in point here in terms of its canonical

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example: Paul's treatment of the divisions in the Corinthian church (I Corinthians 3:1-9); his exhortation to the Galatians to free themselves from divisions created by the law and for the sake of love (Galatians 5:13-15); and his admonition to the Thessalonians to live together with respect and patience (I Thessalonians 12:22).

status vis-à-vis the Anglican Communion. As a union of Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches, this unusual form of ecclesial relations emerged as a response to the profound challenges posed by Christian divisions in India and for the sake of a more effective strategy of Christian witness. In 1955, a state of “limited inter-communion” was achieved between the Church of South India and the Church of England.

Each of these historical milestones illustrates the continuing challenge presented by a communion ecclesiology in which the form of Anglican ecclesial relations is always at the service of the content of Christian mission and ministry. And this does present a challenge precisely because the organic relations Paul described as the Body of Christ constitute one of the key elements of Christian witness to the Gospel, which neither coercive centralized authority nor isolated autonomy can properly enact. These historical markers likewise illustrate how the content of Christian ministry shapes the form of communion as something other than the conformity of agreement. Indeed, the many adjustments and alterations to the form of ecclesial relations in the Anglican Communion have served the long-held Anglican conviction that being “in communion” with each other is not synonymous with being “in full agreement” with each other. This conviction reflects a primary point of contact with the good news of the Gospel itself, which is not dependent on either theological or moral “correctness” but only on grace and forgiveness. “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,” Paul wrote, “entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (II Corinthians 5:19).

Today, the Anglican Communion faces the same kind of theological challenge with reference to the content of Christian ministry as ECUSA experienced in the context of the American civil war and concerning the ordination of women as priests and bishops. Both historically and today, proposals for “alternative episcopal oversight” and notions of “broken communion” threaten the vitality of the Anglican *via media* in such a way as to obscure the good news of the Gospel, which Paul expressed in terms of reconciliation. The Gospel offers good news to a violently divided world not by covering over disagreements with a contrived or superficial harmony but by promising that the Holy Spirit will make differences of opinion the very means by which each of us learns what we could not have learned on our own. Trusting in that promise requires from each of us the willingness to live with uncomfortable disagreements, some of which extend from one generation to the next, as the Holy Spirit shapes us further into the kind of people God intends – a people engaged in ongoing reconciliation. By way of contrast, inserting “irreconcilable differences” into the very structure of institutional church life – which is precisely what alternative episcopal oversight indicates – would sacrifice the content of Christian ministry for the sake of maintaining a particular form of ecclesial relation.

In short, a communion ecclesiology does not simply embrace differences for their own sake (the mistake of individualistic autonomy) any more than it imposes regulatory dogma to “solve” disputes (the mistake of centralized church order). Instead, a communion ecclesiology inspires and demands the hard work of discernment through rigorous academic study, prayerful conversation and regular participation in the sacramental life of the church, all of which are just some of the ways the Holy Spirit leads us deeper into truth. Even so, after engaging in that process of discernment as diligently as we are able, the faithful evolution of Christian thought and practice will sometimes create contentious moments of disagreement. It is exactly then, in those moments, that a communion ecclesiology relies explicitly on the promised “fruits of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-26) and especially on love, which Paul declared was the greatest among all the others (I Corinthians

13:13). None of us, Paul insists, can see clearly now but only as in a mirror, dimly (I Corinthians 13:12), which is why only love and not doctrinal or behavioral conformity can give adequate shape to a communion ecclesiology.

“By their fruits,” Matthew’s Jesus says, “you will know them” (7:20), an insight echoed in Paul’s insistence that love fulfills the law (Romans 13:10) and in the Johannine claim that by loving one another God lives in us (I John 3:12). These biblical claims are not merely sentimental platitudes, as if being Christian means simply being nice to each other. These biblical claims actually set a rigorous standard by which to judge the form of our ecclesial relations and point us yet again to the theological authority of the Eucharist. Gathered around the Eucharistic table, the story of God’s own self-giving love shapes us as a people who likewise give ourselves away to each other for the sake of love, reconciliation and abundant life. None of this makes the Anglican *via media* in any way an easy road to follow or simply a set of muddle-headed compromises. To the contrary, the Anglican *via media* charts a difficult course to follow that will on occasion and even frequently ask us to share Eucharist with those who are different from us, sometimes significantly different, while trusting that “love covers a multitude of sins” (I Peter 4:8) and that the Holy Spirit, that wind and breath of God, will stir in each of us the ongoing work of conversion (John 3:7-8). As former Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey noted, Anglican Christianity is primarily a “method, a use, and a direction, it cannot be defined or even perceived as a ‘thing in itself,’ and it may elude the eyes of those who ask ‘What is it?’ and ‘Where is it?’ It has been proved and will be proved again by its fruits and work.”<sup>9</sup> As Paul insisted to the Corinthians, the fruit and work of a communion ecclesiology is, quite simply and profoundly, *love*.

Ethicist and moral theologian Stanley Hauerwas offers a succinct summary of this crucial point:

We continue this truth [of the Gospel] when we see that the struggle of each to be faithful to the Gospel is essential to our own lives. I understand my own story through seeing the different ways in which others are called to be [Jesus’] disciples. If we so help one another, perhaps, like the early Christians when challenged about the viability of their faith, we can say, “But see how we love one another.”<sup>10</sup>

Additional theological reflection on sexuality can lead us a bit further into these ecclesiological considerations, especially when human sexuality is brought more securely into the orbit of Trinitarian doctrine.

## 2. *Trinitarian Touchstones*

In her magisterial work, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, Catherine Mowry Lacugna offers this rather pointed observation: “The fact that sexuality is very rarely discussed in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity is, I believe, another symptom of its defeat.”<sup>11</sup> Theologians have only recently begun to take up in earnest the challenge Lacugna poses, which holds significant

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<sup>9</sup> James E. Griffiss, ed. *To Believe is to Pray: Readings from Michael Ramsey* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1996), 44.

<sup>10</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 52.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Mowry Lacugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 407, n.84.

implications for contemporary controversies among many Christian communities and not just among Anglicans. An adequate treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity, however, lies well beyond the scope of this essay, even though the complex and varied development of Trinitarian theology offers a particularly apt illustration of the faithful evolution of Christian thought to which I have been trying to point in these observations. A brief overview of some of the more salient touchstones in Trinitarian theology will, I trust, suffice to make some important connections between sexuality, theology and church order.

Sustained attention to explicitly Trinitarian formulations began only after the contours of Christological controversies had already taken shape, roughly the fourth and fifth centuries, and rather quickly divided between Latin and Greek approaches. At issue in this stage of Christian theological reflection was how to articulate the unity of the Trinitarian “persons.” Augustine, whose work influenced the Latin approach, stressed the idea of a single divine “substance” shared equally among the “persons” as the ground of their unity. In trying to find appropriate language for this conceptualization, Augustine eventually turned to what today might be called psychological introspection (thus to speak of the unity of the Trinity is analogous to speaking about the unity of the human person in terms, for example, of memory, reason and will).

The three theologians known collectively as the Cappadocians, by contrast, whose work influenced the Greek approach, understood divine unity not in terms of a single divine substance, but located that unity in the relations of the “persons,” without which relations they could no longer be considered “persons” at all. Significantly, the word “person” proves to be problematic for these Greeks and for reasons similar to some of today’s problems in understanding our own individuality in relation to community. Contrary to the modern notion of a person as an individual entity sufficient unto itself for its identity, the Cappadocians relied on an irreducibly social construction of the human person; so also, they began to suspect, is the case for God.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, they insisted that we cannot speak of the one divine substance except and only with reference to the divine relations. For the Cappadocians, divine substance *is* relation. In this sense, God can be said to exist only insofar as relationality is that divine substance of which we speak. The same insight therefore applies to human beings created in the image of the divine; we exist only in our relations.

Several centuries later, John of Damascus expanded on both of these views by giving more attention to the Greek concept of *perichoresis* as a way to describe Trinitarian relations, a concept notoriously difficult to translate into English. It evokes a sense of permeation without confusion, encompassment without circumscription, penetration without violation. While the philological warrant for it is tenuous at best, some have discerned in this Greek word a hint of the English word choreography, the dynamism and vitality of which, as Lacugna argues, John of Damascus wished to apply to God as Trinity:

Choreography suggests the partnership of movement, symmetrical but not redundant, as each dancer expresses and at the same time fulfills him/herself towards the other. In interaction and intercourse, the dancers (and the observers) experience one fluid motion of encircling, encompassing, permeating, enveloping, outstretching. There are neither

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<sup>12</sup> As just one treatment of the problematic aspects of “personhood,” see David S. Cunningham’s analysis of modern individuality vis-à-vis Trinitarian notions of communication and participation in *These Three are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 165-195.

leaders nor followers in the divine dance, only an eternal movement of reciprocal giving and receiving, giving again and receiving again.<sup>13</sup>

Even this brief survey of Trinitarian issues discloses several significant points of contact between historical traditions and contemporary issues. First, Trinitarian formulations developed slowly, over many centuries. Even within what later became known as “orthodox” doctrine, no single image sufficed for articulating the Trinitarian reality of God.<sup>14</sup> The faithful evolution of Christian theology, even with reference to the Trinity, takes on a variety of forms and cannot be reduced to a single formula. The historical diversity of Christian traditions, even when restricting our view to orthodoxy, can give us pause today concerning the viability of a strictly uniform Christian belief. To put this in another way, the form in which Christian belief is articulated matters less than the content generated by those forms.

Second, Christian communities have historically found it easier to say what God is not than to say precisely what or who God is. Augustine and the Cappadocians would certainly agree that they were speaking of the same divine reality in their various theologies, yet precise definitions for it continually eluded them. On the one hand, they sought to avoid monarchial notions of God in which an excessive stress on divine unity might reduce the “persons” merely to “modes” of divine action (the heresy of “modalism”). On the other hand, they worried about making the distinctions among the “persons” so severe as to suggest that the Trinity refers to three gods rather than one (the heresy of “tritheism”). A significantly wide terrain of possibilities lies between these two extremes and on which Christian theologians continue to conduct faithful experiments with language and concepts today. These concerns exhibited in historical traditions with reference to God suggest avenues of anthropological reflection on what “community” and “communion” mean in relation to “individuals.” As neither monarchial uniformity nor isolated individuality properly applies to orthodox Trinitarian notions of God, our notions of human relationality and autonomy deserve far richer and more carefully nuanced explorations and treatments than many of our canonical provisions about church order would seem to invite.

Third, the ecstatic dance of the Trinity and the mutual self-giving of the Dancers (to borrow from John of Damascus) offers fruitful possibilities for reflecting on human sexuality. The way in which Trinitarian traditions developed suggests we ought to avoid any attempt to correlate the divine “persons” of the Trinity to the human persons of a family (by restricting, for example, human participation in the Trinity to the interaction of father, mother, and child). The endlessly rich and mysterious form of divine relations as expressed variously in Trinitarian conceptualizations urges a much broader view of the forms exhibited in human relationship. Historical theologian Sarah Coakley, for example, suggests some important links among Paul’s Letter to the Romans, the development of Trinitarian theology and the experience of human sexual relations. In Paul’s description of prayer in which the Spirit intercedes through us to God-in-Christ (Romans 8:26-27), Coakley finds hints of later Trinitarian developments, which are further illuminated by the

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<sup>13</sup> Lacugna, *God for Us*, 272.

<sup>14</sup> In *De Trinitate*, for example, Augustine at first suggests the image of “the Lover, the Beloved and the Love that binds them” as an image of God’s Trinitarian relations but quickly abandons it in favor of psychological metaphors, among which he never chooses just one as better than all the others. Likewise, the Cappadocians seemed to worry about the traditional language of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” and how such language implies relations of subordination and power within the Trinity. For more on both of these issues and approaches, see Lacugna, *God for Us*, 52-110.

experience of discovering a “shared transcendence” in the mutual abandonment of sexual love. In such sexual relation, Coakley notes, we are not two but three, “you, me, and our creation of that ecstasy of ourself in us.”<sup>15</sup> Here again, reflecting on the traces of Trinitarian reality in human relationships has less to do with the form of those relationships than with the content of the communion they generate.

These Trinitarian touchstones of Christian faith provide the proper theological context in which to consider both our sexual relations and our ecclesial relations with reference to the issues Anglicans currently face regarding church order. Created in the image of God (the *imago Dei* is in fact the *imago Trinitate*), human beings desire and seek communion precisely because God does. In Trinitarian Christian faith, God is not only personal but also fundamentally and essentially social. Erotic, sexual relations may be the most common but is certainly not the only form in which we express our desire for communion. There are many others, whether in the bonds of deep friendship, in the work of building community or in ecological interactions with our environment. The forms of these various relations deserve evaluation primarily as to the content of the communion they generate, just as the various forms we construct for describing Trinitarian relations matter less than experiencing and perceiving the content of those relations in their creative, saving, and sanctifying energies. Any evaluation of our ecclesial relations deserves similar Trinitarian reflections with respect to the kind of communion we wish the form of those relations to generate, inspire, and nurture.

### **3. Summary: As Yet Unrealized Communion**

Properly construed, theological reflection on both sexual relations and ecclesial relations gives consideration to the desire for communion planted in each of us by the God who created us. Anglicans approach such theological reflection in the context of the faithful evolution of Christian thought and practice in which the form of our various relationships undergoes continual reevaluation for the sake of the content of that desire for communion. In this sense, God’s own Trinitarian mission continually reshapes the form of our ecclesial relations. Beginning in the divine act of creation and extending into the people of Israel and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and with the gift of the Holy Spirit that forms the church into the Body of Christ, God’s own mission is at long last to bring all of us and the whole Creation fully into the dance of God’s own Trinitarian life. Our sexual relations and our ecclesial relations already participate in that dance, but only partially and haltingly. The institutional church, with its various structures and regulating canons, bears witness to God’s own mission but only as a sign, not as a completed embodiment of that communion for which God makes us, saves us and sanctifies us. The energy of this as yet unrealized communion shapes the historical development of Christian theology, which Anglican traditions reflect in our ongoing struggles to define and enact what it means to be “in communion” with each other and with God.

As Christian thought and practice continues its faithful evolution, it behooves us to place all of our individual and corporate decisions, including those dealing with canon law, firmly within God’s own Trinitarian mission. This will not make our decisions any easier to make or our choices any more comfortable to live with. In fact, modalistic, tritheistic and even unitarian forms of theology tend to be much easier to manage. Trinitarian theology invites and urges us to learn how

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<sup>15</sup> Sarah Coakley, “Living into the Mystery of the Trinity: Trinity, Prayer, and Sexuality,” *Anglican Theological Review* 80:2 (1998), 231.

to dance with partners we may not particularly like and with whom we disagree, even on issues as fundamental as the steps for the dance. Trinitarian theology urges us to do these difficult things because only then will we learn that how we dance matters far less than that we dance at all, and that the dance itself is love.

## SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Anglican styles of Christianity reflect the dynamic character of historical theological traditions, which are continually in the process of faithful evolution. The theological method Anglicans have developed from the tools of scripture, tradition and reason functions best in the context of genuine conversation that acknowledges human fallibility and shares in common prayer. Within such contexts, Anglicans understand theological authority to reside with God alone, the guidance of which we seek to discern in texts, traditions and institutional structures, but especially in Eucharistic celebrations.

These theological touchstones in Anglican Christianity shape questions about church order in particular ways, which must always be addressed with a view toward the content of Christian ministry. The many adjustments and changes to the form of ecclesial relations in Anglican history were made for the sake of being “in communion” with each other, which Anglicans have never understood as synonymous with being “in full agreement” with each other. The form of our ecclesial relations should serve the content of the Gospel itself, which entrusts to each of us the ministry of reconciliation.

Those of us who support the episcopate of V. Gene Robinson and the decision of the Diocese of the New Westminster to bless same-gender unions – support born from decades of biblical and theological study, vigorous debate in countless task forces and commissions, fervent prayer and intentionally broad and careful discernment – do not expect that every province of the Anglican Communion will agree with us, nor do we demand such agreement. Many of us do, however, believe it would be a significant *theological* mistake to initiate procedures for “alternative episcopal oversight” among those who object to our position. Enacting such oversight in structural ways would mean abandoning the Anglican *via media*, obscuring the theological authority of the Eucharist, and truncating the insights of traditional Trinitarian faith. The mystery of God’s Trinitarian life urges *all* of us to understand our opinions and positions as provisional, continually subject to the ongoing scrutiny of the whole community, trusting that we will learn from our disagreements and from each other’s mistakes as the Holy Spirit leads us gradually deeper into truth.

Carefully defined doctrines, perfectly crafted liturgies and precise executions of canon law will always fall short of the hope for communion that inspired them. It is the restless energy of that hope and the courageous faith such hope inspires that make us church, a people who insist on hoping for more than we can now see. As the biblical writer reminds us, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). The perpetually unsettled and at times turbulent relations in the worldwide Anglican Communion can express that unseen hope and actually give voice to the good news of Christian faith: There is still more to hope for in our encounters with God. On the other hand, institutionalizing disagreement – which is effectively what alternative episcopal oversight would accomplish – circumscribes the scope of Christian hope

by insisting that there is nothing left to learn from sharing in Eucharistic communion with those with whom we disagree.

The faithful evolution of Christian faith and practice, just like the evolution of life on this planet, does not happen all at once nor does it transpire on a smooth and even trajectory. It happens slowly and fitfully, sometimes quickly and dramatically with moments of breathtaking beauty and many more of painstaking struggle. No one can see clearly where the process will eventually lead. We can only trust that the One who creates us and the One who redeems us in Jesus and the One who breathes through us with the Spirit will remain with us and for us as we struggle – and provide the grace to engage in that struggle with love.

Respectfully and Faithfully Submitted by

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