

The churches and sexual wholeness together

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Archbishop Jensen has recently decided not to take his Sydney bishops to the Archbishop of Canterbury's forthcoming conference in Lambeth, London. This formal diplomatic statement is a protest against the direction of North American Anglicanism, and is made in solidarity with several other Anglican bishops. 'We remain committed to the international Anglican communion,' says Archbishop Jensen, and life in our churches will go on. Most people will not think much about this diplomatic protest, and relatively few will pay close attention to it.

But the reasons for their attention are worth our reflection. Do the grounds for the boycott—in this case, differing views over the place of homosexuality in our fellowship—mean that conservative Christians and Anglicans are 'homophobic'? Are they obsessed with sex? Has the Anglican church now split?

Anglican churches have generally not gone down the same road as some other Christian churches, where 'membership' is based upon a demonstration of some kind of 'moral purity'. The New Testament churches offered an open door to everyone (e.g. 1 Cor. 14:24-25). This fact, and Augustine's subsequent teaching based upon it, means that Anglican churches have traditionally practised an open-door policy where all may enter and participate. This 'permeable boundary' between the wider world and the Christian community is what makes our kind of Christian community messy and complex. It cannot really be any other way, because all of us have fallen short of God's glory (Rom. 6:23) and all of us are dependent upon his grace, forgiveness and restoration in our life together. We try then to be patient with one another, since none of us have 'arrived' at the kind of holiness that would make us fit for heaven.

We embark together on the astonishing project to discover what it is, in one of the New Testament's most evocative phrases, to be 'in Christ'. This 'in' has more than one aspect. We may be *safe* 'in' the redemption he has won for us, whoever we are and whatever we have done. But our ongoing *identity* is also 'in' him, who embraces us and recreates us into something like himself. 'If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; old things have passed away, and look, new things have come.' (2 Cor. 5:17.) This new identity is a voyage of discovery. We do not lose our past stories, yet we increasingly understand ourselves in reference to Jesus Christ. That lifelong project cannot be summed up here; if it could, we would no longer be following Jesus.

It does not follow that anyone may lead these churches. The apostles looked forward to Christ's work in people's lives so that some emerge as appropriate to lead by their example as well as by their words—journeymen, we might say, who have been on the road to heaven a little longer than us. But the fact remains that all are welcomed in, to begin to discover what it might look like to subject every area of our 'identity' to Jesus Christ, so that old things might pass away and new things come.

Our sexual thoughts and feelings are one such area. Based on a cumulative case, evidenced across the whole Bible, we begin to discover that sexual wholeness is found either through chaste singleness, or through faithful marriage between a man and a woman. Like much that appears in the Bible, and which Jesus and his apostles affirm in their thought and practice, this news is not immediately obvious and is probably surprising for every culture. For example, in cultures where my identity as a man is formed through my production of male heirs, I discover instead that a chaste life of singleness is thinkable, liveable and honourable, since my true identity is known by God himself, and my truest family emerges when I meet brothers and sisters in his coming kingdom. I no longer then need to obsess about wives, reproduction, and the 'family name'. Or if as a couple we remain childless, then amidst our grief we yet discover that we no longer need grieve the 'loss' of the 'family name'. Being 'in Christ' changes all that.

Our culture has another take on human identity. It has decided that our sexual thoughts, feelings and experiences are essential to human identity. If we are forty year old virgins, we are somehow incomplete. If we have sexual yearnings that are not met, then our lives have not been fully lived. Our sexual fantasies are interpreted to mean that we are like a machine that 'needs' sex, just as a car 'needs' fuel. We could call this anthropological view 'sexualism', or 'sexual essentialism', and if we hold it, it colours all we think and do. Marriages are automatically under threat if there is any sexual shortcoming. Singleness is necessarily incomplete, and the *absence* of sexual frustration somehow becomes weird. Friendships are confusing, for at the first sign of intimacy, we wonder if the friendship should therefore find a sexual expression.

We have for the sake of brevity perhaps overstated and oversimplified this ‘sexualism’; but it cannot be denied that this philosophy undergirds a great deal of our interpretation of our world. Into this view appears the gospel, which surprisingly declares that we can ‘find ourselves’ not in sexual essentialism but ‘in Christ’. (In another context, where other claims for identity were held dear, Paul says that ‘for his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him,’ Philippians 3:8-9). Our sexuality *can* be lived in the chaste singleness lived out by the man Jesus Christ, or in the faithful lifelong marriages that he affirmed and promoted.

Anglican churches in Sydney, then, represent a collection of Christian communities seeking to discover sexual wholeness in the practices of chaste singleness and faithful marriage. We do not pretend that the journey is straightforward or easy. The ‘sexualism’ we all carry within, emerging as we do from this culture, means that sometimes it is simply difficult to believe that Christ’s way is thinkable. Sexual feelings do sometimes seem like final truth. Yet we also find ourselves surrounded by men and women who are forging contented marriages, and single people who are learning the art of a network of intimate, non-sexualised friendships.

When we practice church well (which is not always), gays and lesbians are warmly invited into this fellowship and this journey. We know that this particular way of journeying to sexual wholeness will be surprising and hard for them, just as it has been for every member of our fellowship; and with the extra burden that people with homosexual thoughts and feelings have often been singled out for vicious attacks that the Bible in no way warrants. (For example, the much misused Old Testament adjective ‘abomination’ was equally applied in its time and place to a variety of practices that all fell short of God’s glory. Moreover in the New Testament, those laws were no longer envisaged to apply in the same ways. Its writers routinely class homosexual activity alongside other non-sexual habits that exemplify ‘sin’, but they only say enough for us to know that they have a view on it. They speak much more of other sins, such as carelessness toward the poor.)

To dispute ‘sexualism’ is not to claim that we are ‘sexless’. Of course, our sexual parts, potentials and yearnings are integral to our bodies, and Christians delight in the magnificence of this sexuality. The point at issue is where, when and how it is directed. In sexualised culture, we make subtle and powerful anthropological claims in the labels we presume to bestow. ‘Gay’, ‘lesbian’, ‘bi’, ‘ladies man’, ‘hottie’, ‘slut’, ‘stud’, ‘family man’, or ‘frigid’ all assume that our sexual desire and its expression defines who we are. But the communities we see in the New Testament release all to discover a new identity: ‘in Christ’, and the sexuality of these communities consists in seeking sexual wholeness together by living alongside one another in a way that brings sexual safety and honour to all. The practices of chaste singleness and faithful marriage liberate us into a space that is not constantly agitated by the erratic whims of *eros*.

In this kind of community, there would not be the public endorsement of anything that is not chaste singleness or faithful marriage; but the ‘permeable’ nature of our fellowship means that we do know how each person’s life is only partway along the journey. Some singles are not yet content and sometimes give themselves sexually to others. Some men want to have sex with other men. Some women are revolted by men and seek intimacy with other women. Some marrieds are so revolted by each other, or so caught in cycles of pain or misunderstanding, that it seems impossible to believe marriage can be good. Some people simply cannot stop thinking about sex, or are addicted to pornography. Others cannot stop thinking wrongly about children. On and on it goes in a sad pantheon of sexual brokenness that we all bring to the community of fellowship. Just as in other areas of our lives, the darkest episodes of our journey to sexual wholeness are sometimes conducted by faith alone, in the Christ who keeps promising to re-form us by his Spirit, and to lead us to what is good. Yet we find fellowship and intimacy across these differences, beyond these various kinds of brokenness, finding friendships in Christ that sustain us and contribute to making us new.

Jensen’s decision reflects his affirmation and honour of these communities, which are no more or less ‘obsessed with sex’ than the culture of sexualism that surrounds them. Of course it is obvious that other communities will also form from within in such a culture—communities that are committed to the religious expression of sexual essentialism. (In these communities, parts of the Bible dealing with friendship are often read through the grid of this essentialism: for example, Jesus’ love for John, or David’s love for Jonathan, may be claimed to hint at the endorsement of erotic same-sex love. Hence representatives of the different communities argue about the proper ‘reading’ of the Bible.)

Thankfully, the right of free assembly that is protected in our democracies means that each such community is free to assemble, and to attempt to find peace in its own way. In this sense, then, the Christian church (not just Anglican churches) has already informally divided a long time ago, between

those congregations who seek to find peace in 'sexualist' accounts of human identity, and those who seek to find their identity elsewhere. (We have seen such splits in Christian history before, as when Arian churches found it impossible to believe that divinity could sully itself with humanity.) Each community may have to conduct its experiment in theological anthropology over decades, perhaps even centuries. What lies ahead is the delicate political task of how we might live alongside one another in relative harmony.

In a future briefing, we will examine what all this might mean for the wider community's discussion about the possibility of formal recognition for same-sex unions. But that is a question for another day, for we have nothing to say there if we cannot make sense to each other.

In the meantime, Sydney Anglicans might join with Archbishop Jensen in his message to the Archbishop of Canterbury. 'I have assured him of our prayers as we continue in the Anglican communion,' he writes. The divisions can stay informal, and our communities may yet find how to live alongside one another in our respective quests for peace and wholeness.

*Andrew Cameron
for the Social Issues Executive, Diocese of Sydney*

Sources/Further Reading:

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