

Are we stronger than He?

by David Short

With the release of the Windsor Report, there has been a great deal of talk around the Anglican Communion on topics such as diocesan boundaries and the authority of bishops.

By contrast, this important paper tackles the Biblical issues underlying much of the crisis in the Anglican world and deserves to be widely read.

In the United States of America a jeweller rents wedding rings. You pay a weekly rental and after 12 months can keep the rings because “Statistically, people change their marriage partner before they change their Miele washing machine.”¹

The current crisis of Anglicanism in Canada and the USA reflects a deep and disturbing change in Western culture. We are living through a profound cultural shift in the way men and women enter, leave and re-enter sexual relationships, and in the way we think about child-bearing, nurture and family structure. Cohabitation, for example, has virtually replaced engagement, and increasingly couples have children later, out of marriage, if at all.²

There are four elements in this shift.³

First, in the aftermath of sexual revolution and contraception, **the purpose of sex has moved from procreation and relationship to relationship alone.** You can see evidence of this shift in the changes to the marriage service from the Canadian Book of Common Prayer (BCP 1962) to the Book of Alternative Services (BAS 1985). The BCP states three purposes of marriage: “for the hallowing of the union betwixt man and woman; for the procreation of children... and for the mutual society, help and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, in both prosperity and adversity.”

The BAS asserts only two purposes namely: for the couples’ “mutual comfort and help, that they may know each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love [and that they may be blessed in the procreation, care, and upbringing of children].” Notice that the second purpose is bracketed in the service, and that procreation is demoted from



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being a discrete purpose of God for marriage in itself to being part of the couple's future experience of blessing. It reflects our culture where children are increasingly optional, accidental and peripheral to sexual relations.

Second, sexual relationships have become radically privatised. If sex is primarily about relationship, it becomes increasingly isolated from any wider dimension of public service or extended family. Sex is part of my personal lifestyle choice. Part of this shift is the whole notion of 'sexuality'—in itself an individualistic notion cut free from a larger moral ecology of family, society and church.⁴

Third, sex is for self-fulfilment. If marriage or sex now have no outward goal and if sex is focussed just on my relationship, then sex is for my personal development and fulfilment. Hence I have a moral obligation to divorce my present wife if she can no longer promote my growth and development. Sex is understood as the expression of my inner freedom and gratification.

Fourth, sex becomes my saviour. To be self-fulfilled I must be free to express 'my sexuality'. How can I be a fulfilled human being if I cannot express myself sexually? Western culture is implicitly anti-child and sex obsessed with sex portrayed as a deep necessity of life, even a reason for living. It has become a substitute for communion with the living God. The romantic myth preached by Hollywood exalts sex as a

metaphysical absolute so that it has become the real sacrament, the one mediator between God and man. Atonement is no longer salvation from sin through Christ's cross. Rather, it is through sexual release where I express the real me and thus a return to the Canaanite religion.

In response Christian churches have tended to two opposite reactions.

One is to capitulate to culture, to embrace the current worldview, to change fundamental historic teaching in the belief that the Spirit is leading the culture to a new place. The other is to turn inward and adopt a fortress mentality, to separate from the wicked world, to become isolationist and pure—even self-righteous. However, neither of these responses is faithful, helpful or biblical. We need to find a more excellent way.

Letter to a church in crisis

In the letter of 1 Corinthians the Apostle Paul writes to a church in deep crisis, a crisis which alarmingly echoes our own. Corinth had it all: they fought over leadership, some taught that they would not rise from the dead and they were deeply divided.

More relevant to the current crisis in the Anglican communion, there was open sexual immorality in the church (in a number of forms), not only tolerated but condoned, demonstrating that the Corinthians were puffed up with pride and self-confidence.

It is vital for us to hear what the Apostle wrote to this church in crisis. Parts of this letter are surprising, even shocking, particularly with regard to sexual immorality within the church. Paul raises extremely troubling and uncomfortable questions which Anglicans must face if we are to move forward in a way that exalts the sovereign grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. The individual texts of 1 Corinthians must be read within the context of the whole letter, otherwise the apostle's meaning can be distorted and misapplied. For example in the first chapter Paul writes:

"I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another

so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought."
(1 Cor. 1:10)

This text has been liberally used to implore orthodox Anglicans in Canada to fall into line and stop disturbing unity—as the Joker said to Batman, "Why can't we all just get along?"

But not all forms of unity are biblical. There was an immense unity in the hostility expressed

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toward God at Babel and the nations rage against the Lord's Messiah in Psalm 2 with exquisite harmony. There was a form of unity in Corinth which opposed God by ignoring His word and condoning sexual immorality. So in chapter eleven the Apostle writes:

"In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval." (1 Cor. 11:18-19)

Just as Jesus taught so Paul teaches that there are necessary divisions which are part of God's sovereign work to show who are truly his. The only true unity is unity in the truth of the gospel and the proof of the genuineness of our faith is not ecclesiastical status, or office, or even doctrinal orthodoxy, but behaviour which reflects the gospel. Paul opposes divisions based on the personality of the leader or other trivial issues as well as any unity that seeks to paste over disobedience. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "Where Christ bids me maintain fellowship for the sake of love, I will maintain it. Where his truth enjoins me to dissolve a fellowship for love's sake, there I will dissolve it, despite all the protests of my human love."⁵

Some divisions the Apostle recognised as only inevitable but necessary. It depends on your

view of the church and this is where the letter of 1 Corinthians is so important for us today. In chapter three Paul reveals the church's true nature:

“Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred [holy], and you are that temple.” (1 Cor. 3:16-17)

The Corinthians' behaviour showed their false understanding of the church. The Christian congregation of believers is the temple of God's Spirit; the inner sanctuary where God dwells, not just the outer precincts. The Old Testament promise of God dwelling among his people is now fulfilled through the presence of the Holy Spirit with the people of Christ. God's people in Corinth were the temple of God, the dwelling place of the living God in Corinth, just as Christian congregations function today in Bombay, Nairobi, London and Toronto.

The crucial factor for us is that the one central feature of that temple is that it is holy. Holiness is the fundamental distinguishing mark of God's people. Since the God of the Bible is Holy, Holy, Holy, we as his people are meant to be holy; not in a ritual sense but morally and ethically,⁶ with lives set apart for his purposes.

If we're puzzled and wonder “what on earth does that mean?” it is fascinating to trace the answer the Apostle gives. In chapters 5–11 Paul spells out what commentators call the New Testament holiness code.⁷ He begins:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? (1 Cor. 5:1-2)

The word used for 'sexual immorality' is *porneia* (from which we derive 'pornography'), widely used in Hellenistic Judaism to cover all extra-marital sexual sins including homosexuality, adultery, incest, bestiality.⁸ It appears often in the New Testament lists of sins not because the early Christians were uptight about sex but because these sins were so prevalent and accepted in the

culture of that time that early converts found it hard to break clear of their former lives.⁹ The specific form of sexual immorality being tolerated and condoned in Corinth was a form of incest, meaning that a member of the congregation was living in sexual sin.¹⁰

Yet what staggers the Apostle in verse 2 is not so much the open sin, but that the Corinthians were proud of it. When Paul writes “And you are proud!” he is not referring to arrogance and pride in general but to the fact that some in Corinth were affirming their right and authority to condone incest and promiscuity (chapter 6:12-20). It had become a cause célèbre. They were loud and proud and trying to give this behaviour a theological basis. One is tempted to say that they were seeking to affirm the integrity and sanctity of open sexual immorality.

The Apostle deals with this situation in a remarkable way. In chapters 5 and 6 he gives very

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little attention to the specific sins of immorality. What distresses him so deeply is the churches attitude to these open sexual practices. The allowing, condoning and celebrating of this sexual immorality, Paul felt, was a crisis of authority and of the gospel itself. The Corinthians' failure to deal with the sexual immorality in their midst did not simply represent their low view of sin, what was at stake was the church itself. They were in danger of destroying the temple of God.

This issue is so urgent that the Apostle instructs the Corinthians on it no less than five times.

- In verse 2 he asks with astonishment:
“Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?”
- In verse 7 he commands:
“Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch

without yeast — as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.”

- In verse 9 referring to a previous letter addressing this issue he claims:
“I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.”
- In verse 11 Paul commands:
“you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.”
- Perhaps most significant is verse 5:
“hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.”

Handing over to Satan means moving the immoral person back out into the world which is Satan’s sphere; something done by the whole community not just one or two.

Wonderfully, the purpose of these actions is ultimately redemptive: that “the sinful nature,” meaning “what is fleshly or carnal in him” might be destroyed so that he might be saved eternally. The discipline of dissociation is remedial. Paul is no separatist but clearly, for this man living in open sexual immorality, there is meant to be an actual separation from fellowship with God’s people, so that ultimately he will repent and rejoin that community.

The separation will do two things: it will protect this man from deceiving himself that he can pretend to call upon the name of the Lord while living in open, unrepentant sexual immorality; and it will protect the temple of God from being becoming contaminated. That is the point of verses 6-8:

Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast — as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Cor. 5:6-8)

Left alone, open sin, unrepented of, and when not dealt with by the Christian community, acts like yeast (leaven) infecting the whole body of

Christ. Christ has died, not just to win us a ticket to heaven but to create a new humanity where together we express the holy character of God.

The Apostle knows exactly how this sounds so to clear up any misunderstanding he goes on:

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people — not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked man from among you.” (1 Cor. 5:9-13)

Paul urges them forward in two directions: first to continue to immerse themselves in the life of their city, having friendships and associations with non-Christians, irrespective of their morality or lack of it; but secondly to disassociate themselves and not even celebrate the meal with those who call themselves Christian yet insist on their right to continue immoral pagan practices.

His principle is simple: free association outside the church, discipline within. The reason the Apostle gives for this is that God judges those who are outside the church but in Paul’s view the church is meant to judge those who are inside.

We seem to have these two exactly the wrong way round; we are judgmental about those outside the church and tolerate open sin inside the church. There is a great difference between, on the one hand struggling with sin, failing, asking God for forgiveness, beseeching him to grant us true repentance and his Holy Spirit, and on the other hand openly persisting and condoning what is against the will of God and pretending that we are forgiven. God pardons and absolves all who truly repent and unfeignedly believe his holy gospel.

In the New Testament there are two boundary lines for communion, two grounds for restricting fellowship: belief / doctrine, and behaviour / holiness. It is possible to have communion with other Christian believers with whom we honestly disagree, we confess our knowledge is partial

and we need to grow in wisdom. However, it is not possible in New Testament terms to have communion and fellowship with those who do not believe the central tenets of the gospel or who believe a different gospel (read, for example, Galatians 1:6-9): this is the 'belief / doctrine' boundary line.

Here in 1 Corinthians the Apostle's concern is with the 'behaviour / holiness' boundary to fellowship. The principle is clear: it is not possible to have communion with those who call themselves Christian but who condone and practice sexual immorality.

Some have tried to argue that the blessing of same sex unions is not sufficient ground for breaking fellowship because it does not involve central or creedal doctrinal issues such as the incarnation, the trinity or the resurrection. The arguments are entirely unpersuasive and even disingenuous, ignoring the fact that those advocating same sex unions do so on the basis of a revisionist understanding of the doctrines of creation, the image of God, the nature of sin, salvation, redemption, the Christian life, the cross and the afterlife.¹¹ However, putting aside whether the blessing of same sex unions does breach central, creedal doctrinal questions (which it does), it certainly violates the 'behaviour / holiness' boundary line for Christian fellowship. It is impossible to deny that what is at stake is the holiness of the church, indeed our very understanding of holiness.¹²

To the Apostle Paul, for a church to bless, condone or even allow open sexual immorality is a crisis for the church and for the gospel, which can only be healed by the church disassociating and separating itself from those promoting the yeast of unholiness. If Paul instructed the Corinthians to disassociate themselves from the immoral man what on earth would he say to a whole

congregation that voted to affirm the integrity and sanctity of incest or prostitution? What in heaven's name would he have written to a group of congregations that did the same?

The truth is that the Apostle goes on in 1 Corinthians to deal with homosexual intercourse (6:9-11) and with prostitution (6:12-20). In chapter 10 he reveals the links between sexual immorality and idolatry. Throughout these chapters Paul's sustained concern is for the holiness of the fellowship of the temple of God. Both idolatry and immorality provoke the risen Lord to jealousy. "[T]his is the final warning that God's 'jealousy' cannot be challenged with impunity. Those who would put God to the test by insisting on their right to what Paul insists is idolatry are in effect taking God on, challenging him by their actions, daring him to act"¹³ and he asks with chilling candour in 10:22 "are we stronger than he?"

By way of conclusion

There are three things to say by way of conclusion.

The **first** has to do with grace. Every word of 1 Corinthians is written to people who have failed morally and sexually¹⁴—as Paul says in chapter 6, "this is what some of you were." Therefore there is no room for self-righteousness or superiority on the part of any of us. Woven through the very passages quoted in this article is the heartbreaking grace of God in Jesus Christ, wooing us from our sins, opening our eyes to the beauty of holiness, calling us to be the new creation.

"For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth." (1 Cor. 5:7b-8)

The gospel of Christ crucified offers grace to all

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who fail, it does not matter how far we may have fallen it is not too late for us to turn to Christ for his forgiving grace.

But grace without transformation is cheap grace...

That is what we mean by cheap grace, the grace which amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sins departs... Cheap grace is not the kind of forgiveness of sin which frees us from the toils of sin. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.¹⁵

It is a cruel distortion of grace to say “we are all sinners therefore we dare not deal with open sin in the church.” To hide behind Paul’s word that “we are all sinners” and use them as an excuse for inaction or silence is nothing more than Corinthian nihilism. Gordon Fee writes: “those who concern themselves with grace without equal concern for behaviour have missed Paul’s own theological urgencies.”¹⁶

The **second** conclusion has to do with ministry. Gospel ministry is not just proclamation, evangelism, and pastoral care; it involves contending for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. If, at the end of the day, we have maintained Christian orthodoxy but failed to proclaim the gospel, we cannot claim to have pleased Christ nor fulfilled the New Testament ministry. In just the same way, if, at the end of the day we have proclaimed the gospel but failed to maintain Christian orthodoxy, we will have failed Christ.

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is a brilliant example of contending for the faith. If the church is the temple of the living God, and if that temple is holy, then tolerance of what God calls unholy will provoke his jealousy. There is an astonishing campaign at present in Canada and the USA to portray the blessing of same sex unions as a little in-house issue for the church, that those opposing

this constitutionalisation of sexual immorality are somehow missing the point and being side-tracked from gospel ministry. I received a letter this week from someone in the diocese of New Westminster who referred to the stance of biblically orthodox Anglicans as a “tedious and unnecessary conflict.” If that is the case then 1 Corinthians is a tedious and unnecessary book and the holiness of the people for whom Christ died is also tedious and unnecessary.

We cannot just be pragmatic about this. We cannot believe those who say: “Peace, peace, when there is no peace.” Christian ministry which pleases Christ and is faithful to the New Testament will involve both gospel proclamation as well as contending for the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

The **third** conclusion has to do with Jesus himself. We need to ask ourselves: how can we judge (as Paul commands) without being judgmental? How do we insist on holiness without being holier than thou?

I admit the issues are complex. Some denominations exercise swift and harsh discipline and are all too ready to exclude those who do not measure up without having any genuine conversation. As Anglicans we must maintain a godly generosity of spirit and we are rightly slow to discipline or exclude anyone. But if, as a denomination, we are unwilling to consider discipline as the Apostle does, we cannot hope for a restored Anglicanism and we need to ask if we are really the temple of the living God.

If you are tempted to think that this position is just the opinion of a curmudgeonly Apostle, listen to the risen Jesus as he speaks to the church of Thyatira:

To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.

I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling...

Only hold on to what you have until I come. To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations — ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery’ — just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev. 2:18-29).

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See the ACL’s website at www.acl.asn.au for clickable links to the websites mentioned in these footnotes.

Footnotes

- ¹ From Ash, C. *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 40.
- ² The National Marriage Project, <http://marriage.rutgers.edu>.
- ³ I am following the superb and incisive analysis by Ash, 34-59 and 134-156.
- ⁴ Ash, 49 quoting Woodhead, L. ‘Sex in a wider context’, in Davies and Loughlin, *Sex these Days*, 98-120, (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1997), 99, and Bellah, R. *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 112.
- ⁵ Bonhoeffer, D. *Life Together* (London: SCM, translated by John W. Doberstein, 1954) 22.
- ⁶ Fee, G. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 149.
- ⁷ E.g. “Here we may discern a parallel with the ‘Holiness Code’ for the people of Israel found in the teachings of Moses in Leviticus (especially chapters 18-21).” Barnett, P. *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2000) 77.
- ⁸ Fee, 200, Barnett, 78.
- ⁹ Fee, *ibid.*
- ¹⁰ The present tense indicates an ongoing sexual relationship, Barnett, 78.
- ¹¹ See the excellent articles by J. I. Packer, *Why I Walked*, (*Christianity Today*: January 21, 2003, Vol. 47, No. 1 www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/001/6.46.html and P. F. M. Zahl, *Last Signal to the Carpathia*, (an address delivered at the Episcopal Church Foundation Fellows Forum, “Reconstructing Anglican Comprehensiveness,” 5-6 February 2004, Cathedral

Church of the Advent, Birmingham, Alabama www.advent-birmingham.org/articles.asp?ID=1625) where Zahl demonstrates that blessing same sex unions stands opposed to classic Christian doctrine because it undermines the anthropology of the gospel, eviscerates Christian soteriology, Christology and the historic understanding of the trinity, confuses creation with redemption and is therefore implicitly Pelagian and explicitly Arminian.

- ¹² See E. M. Humphries, *Holy is as Holy Does*, June 2004, (www.anglican.tk/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=593).
- ¹³ Fee, 474.
- ¹⁴ The second chapter of Ash’s book is titled ‘Prejudice and Grace,’ and he finishes with three points: that Christian sexual ethics is addressed to moral failures, that the gospel offers grace to moral failures and that the Spirit of God works in us, who are moral failures to change us. Ash, 24-33.
- ¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, D. *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1948, translated by Kaiser Verlag) 3-4.

Or as the Apostle Paul himself wrote in Titus 2, “*For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.*”
- ¹⁶ Fee, 248.



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