

## AN ASPECT OF THE CONNECTION BETWEEN DOCTRINE AND ETHICS

Recently someone reported that he asked a second-hand car salesman, "Doesn't society regard your profession as on about the second-bottom rung? The salesman replied, "No, clergymen are on that, now."

What a tragedy! American Episcopalian bishops have recently installed an openly gay clergyman as one of their bishops. The Swedish Lutheran bishop Stendahl took part in the ceremony as the representative of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, by an arrangement that the ELCA has with the ECUSA. By a clever dodge, to avoid an outcry by the laity, one of the ELCA bishops did not take part. That does not alter anything. The ELCA now recognises a gay bishop as one of its own, because it is complicit (2 Jn 9-11). However, the serious question to ask is what effect this is having on the members of those churches, on Christians in general, and on the people outside the church. Some clergy have also built up a regrettable reputation through instances of abuse of children. If leaders of the church do not see it as crucial to live according to God's wise design and holy Law, what is the point of protesting about church attestations of single-gender marriages, or, indeed, anything else involved with the church?

We keep saying that it is part of the Post-modern view to regard words with suspicion as a hypocritical cover for what people really want and do. This, of course, indicates a cynical belief in the sinfulness of human beings in general, even if many deny the important doctrinal article of Original Sin. In the clergy, however, what it means is the abandonment of the objective standard of morality, God's Commandments. Although the Anglican communion is reeling as a result of the recent public event, what must be pointed out is that there is a connection between broad-church liberal attitudes and bad conduct. If the Scriptures are not fully reliable about the biblical doctrine of God, the absolute reliability of the Gospels, with their claim to the reality of the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ, why should the words of the Scriptures deter moral degeneracy, either? The current woes of the Christian churches can be traced back to an unfaithful hearing of the Word of God in Scripture.

The Anglican primate Rowan Williams said recently that the ordination of the gay Bishop of New Hampshire, Gene Robinson, was done in "good faith." He also said that the effects of this action would have to be confronted with honesty. It is tragic when there can be talk about "good faith" when people who read their Bibles know that it condemns homosexuality, that all people must live before God in repentance, and that wilful sin makes faith impossible.

Ask, for instance, whether there was any sacrifice available in the Old Testament for deliberate sin. Consider also this passage: "Because of them all the captives from Judah who are in Babylon will take up this curse: 'May the LORD make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in fire!' The reason is that they have been committing deliberate sins in Israel. They have been committing adultery with their neighbours' wives. They have been speaking lying words in My name. I had not commanded them to do that. I am the One who knows, and I am a witness", declares the LORD" (Jr 29:22-23).

Treating homosexuality as a normal thing in the sight of God redefines the notion of sin. It cancels the need for Christ's atoning death for sinners. It bypasses that God's requirement of obedience to His commandments and the crucial need for sinners to repent. It means that the church cannot be the salt of the earth and a light to the unchristian people of the world where they are. Clergy rank with self-serving car salesmen, and worse.

Christians must now speak out against the current mock-respect for non-discrimination. We are not talking about equal rights before the law of the state, or equal opportunity for the poor, or defending selfish attitudes that are based on race or individual preferences. The whole of God's creation is characterised by order and distinctions. Light is not the same as darkness. God separated dry land from the oceans. He made males different from females. Children are different from parents. Human beings, made to bear God's image and likeness, are not equally expendable with plant and animal life. Such differences should not be put aside as if they meant nothing in the sight of the Creator. Honouring styles of life that God has forbidden ultimately means telling God that He did not know what He was doing when He created them to be different. After the fall into sin, He also provided, for the greatest possible freedom of the greatest number, that wives should be subordinate to their husbands, children should be subordinate to their parents, employees should be respectful to their employers, and that citizens should be subordinate to their rulers, as God's ordinance, even though the human beings who occupy responsible positions are themselves sinful.

The Scriptures continue to be remarkably relevant. Jeremiah had a difficult task, to speak God's Word to the unfaithful people of Jerusalem, partly because, at time of war, he predicted that Nebuchadnezzar would capture the city and carry its people away to Babylon. He was regarded as a traitor. In chapter 23 he had a fierce denunciation of prophets and priests who did not adhere to God's Word. They told their own dreams with the chorus, "declares the LORD." Consider these verses: "I have also seen something horrible in the prophets of Jerusalem. They commit adultery and live deceitfully. They encourage those who do evil, so that no one turns from his wickedness. All of them have become like Sodom to Me. Those who are living in Jerusalem have become like Gomorrah." Therefore this is what the LORD of hosts has said about the prophets: "Look! I shall feed them with wormwood and give them poisoned water to drink. Ungodliness has spread from the prophets of Jerusalem to the whole land" (Jr 23:14-15). The trouble was coming from the top down. Some of the points that Jeremiah made bear repetition at our present time. The crucial thing was God's attitude to what was going on in the offices of prophet and priest. There was also the point that ungodliness had spread from the prophets in Jerusalem to the whole land.

The example of Christian clergy is important. Some of the severest words of our Lord Jesus were against the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. He held their teaching office in high regard. "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore do all the things that they tell you, and keep them; but do not do as they do, for they tell others, but do not practise it" (Mt 23:3-4). What follows in the chapter is a withering condemnation of double standards (v. 13-36). Paul often told his readers to imitate his own style of life. In his letters to Timothy and Titus he said that it was important for ministers in the church to have a good reputation outside.

Are things as bad now? Is even teaching by clergy comparable to a defence of Moses? Gene Robinson is using Jesus' treatment of people on the edges of society at His time to justify his own support for the homosexuals and lesbians at the edge of the society of today. It amounts to an open defence of impenitence and contempt for God's holy Word, because he has failed to point out that Jesus required repentance and obedience, and the church of God now must do no less. When Jesus welcomed tax collectors and prostitutes, sorrow for sin and turning from it resulted. Zacchaeus and the woman who wept at Jesus' feet at dinner (Lk 7 and 19) were examples of that. The big difference is that now some clergy are brazenly telling people that how they have been living is OK, and continuing to live like that is OK. They fail to add that Paul warned, "Or do you not know that wicked people will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor people used by homosexuals nor homosexuals nor thieves nor greedy people nor drunkards nor slanderers nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. Indeed, that is what some of you were. Nevertheless, you have been washed, but you have been made holy, but you have been justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:9-11).

The fact that impenitent sinners disregard God's Word on the grounds of non-discrimination will not shield them from God's final discrimination at the judgment. We need to pray earnestly for Christians who find themselves in churches where clergy are brazenly impenitent, that they will be kept clean from wicked influence and preserved in their faith. For without holiness no one will stand before God, have God for his or her God and be a member of the people of God in the glory of eternity. John the Baptist's message had been, "Therefore produce fruit that is worthy of repentance" (Mt 3:8). Yes, there were members of the congregation at congregation at Corinth who had been homosexuals. Paul knew that. Otherwise he would not have written, "Indeed, that is what some of you were." However, the past tense "were" was crucial, and still is crucial. They were so no longer. They had been baptised, made holy with Christ's holiness through faith, and justified. Their bodies were now temples of the Holy Spirit.