

## CHAPTER SIX

## Betting the Farms

*For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open. Therefore, consider carefully how you will listen.*

Luke 8:17-18a

Sooner or later, given the underlying division of the Anglican Church of Canada into two incompatible religions, there was bound to be an issue which would force this uncomfortable truth more fully into the open. For a number of reasons, it is readily apparent that the crucial issue has now arrived with the question of whether or not the Church should expand the concept of marriage to include homosexual unions. Of course, behind this lies the question of the morality of homosexual practice in general<sup>1</sup>.

Belief is a matter of the conscience and the heart. One can change one's belief about Jesus, for example, and that change in belief could easily go unnoticed. Our famous Anglican commitment to comprehensiveness prepared the way for living with a variety of theological positions within the Church as long as morality, which has to do with observable behaviour, was not involved. Add to this the liberal proclivity simply to redefine traditional theological terms and continue to use the liturgies based upon them, instead of just admitting that in their hearts they had adopted a different belief system altogether, and you have a perfect recipe for both deliberate and inadvertent covert change.

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that this discussion could be expanded to include the whole LGBTQ question but for now, at least, the immediate issue is homosexual marriage.

In previous generations liberals seem to have simply adopted the conventional morality of the culture but with the sexual revolution of the sixties the cultural consensus changed and eventually the new liberal attitude to the Bible naturally was applied to its ethical teachings as well as its theology. This was bound to force matters more out into the open. You can switch the meaning of your theological terms and not greatly disturb the status quo. However, change your understanding of "adultery" and someone is bound to notice! Probably your spouse!

Therefore, the fundamental division in the ACC is now being played out before our eyes now that liberals are doing everything they can to push for the full inclusion of practicing homosexuals<sup>2</sup> in the life of the ACC. Because they control the political process in many dioceses, they have been ordaining homosexuals for some time and have recently elected a partnered gay man as a bishop in the diocese of Toronto. This was done while turning a blind eye to the legitimate objections of traditional/conservative Anglicans.

These efforts have now brought matters fully to the surface over the question of homosexual marriage. Marriage is deemed to be a doctrinal issue and as such its definition cannot be changed without the approval of all three houses of General Synod over two consecutive Synods. As this is written, after being approved by one vote in the House of Clergy (and passing comfortably in the Houses of Laity and Bishops) at GS 2016, it awaits the second vote at GS 2019. The years of fudging in matters of belief and avoiding direct doctrinal confrontation have finally come to an end.

And make no mistake about it. Those on both sides appear willing to bet the farm because each rightly sees the issue as integral to its whole point of view. That is why there can be no compromise and no surrender. To do so would mean not just changing one's mind about this one issue but about one's whole approach to the Christian faith as well. This is what is at stake. The outcome will quite literally affect the entire future direction of the Church.

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<sup>2</sup> A distinction needs to be made between practicing homosexuals and those who are celibate. For purposes of readability, from this point on I shall mean the former when speaking of "homosexuals".

From the liberal point of view the question of the full acceptance of the homosexual into the Church, including the ordination, blessing, and now marriage of same-sex couples, is merely a matter of justice, liberation, and inclusion. We have already noted that these themes are dominant in liberalism.

Homosexual persons have clearly suffered at the hands of an oppressive straight society, some physically attacked and even killed. They have not been allowed to be themselves but have been forced to hide their sexual orientation and practice in order to function within that society.

Recent years have seen many of them come out of the closet and some have militantly demanded that they be granted their right to have their sexuality accepted on a par with heterosexuality at all levels. Their cause has been taken up by the cultural elite, especially those on the left, those with whom theological liberals have a strong affinity. For them, and for many in our culture, this has become an issue of fundamental human rights.

For sure, all of the major themes of liberalism converge on this issue. Experience has taught that homosexuals are not terrible people: they are as good and as human as the rest of us sinners. Many priests of all persuasions have found homosexuals in their congregations and have come to appreciate their gifts within the life of the Church as well their pain at being denied full participation. For liberals the negative things the Bible has to say about practicing homosexuals must be evaluated in the light of our own contemporary experience, remembering their understanding that the nature of the Bible itself allows us to pick and choose from its teachings.

Furthermore, homosexuals are seeking liberation, the freedom to be themselves. Nothing could be closer to the liberal heart. And here we are in a Church which makes them into second class citizens. On what basis can they continue to be excluded? It is a shameful thing, from this perspective, that the Church is not prepared to reach out and fully welcome this oppressed minority. For these and other reasons, the full acceptance of practicing homosexuals has become

a non-negotiable item on the liberal agenda. Any other stand would contradict their twin commitments to experience as the ultimate guide and to liberation as the ultimate goal.

Lest anyone be tempted to underestimate the depth of this commitment we need, first of all, to remember the enthusiastic election and consecration of a homosexual man living with his partner in the diocese of Toronto already mentioned. Secondly, ponder this: after it seemed at first that the last General Synod had turned down the proposed change in the Marriage Canon, a number of diocesan bishops went on record as saying that they would proceed anyway and authorize the marriage of homosexuals in their own dioceses. While this vote turned out to be a miscount and the motion actually passed, the stand of these bishops indicates that *homosexual marriage will be a reality in the ACC no matter what the next GS decides!*

While putting principle over process is indeed admirable, it is an ominous sign for the future of the denomination. For starters, these bishops have indicated that they are fully prepared to break the ordination vows they made to conform to the doctrine and discipline of the ACC. As such, they would be answerable to the powers that be! Or would they be? Liberals control the political process as was seen in the Toronto ordination of a partnered gay man. Given the fact that they have been fudging on their ordination vows for generations in regard to “the Doctrine of the ACC”, perhaps they would just continue to turn a blind but practiced eye when it comes to its Discipline. Doubtless this would precipitate a very serious crisis of authority that would further reveal the divisions and frailties that beset us. We will return to this point in the next chapter.

In any event, having rogue bishops of any stripe loose in the denomination would surely precipitate chaos at every level as many would simply conclude that anything goes. As I have already argued, we are not actually that far away from this situation at present and it wouldn't take much of a push to go over the edge. All bets would be off. Except the one involving the farm!

There are some on both sides of this question that see it merely as an extension of the previous debates in the Church over divorce and remarriage and the ordination of women. From this point

of view, hope remains that some kind of accommodation can be reached here as well. While there is some truth to this position, it would be a serious mistake to assume too much similarity between this debate and those of the past.

For one thing, the issue of homosexuality is a clear-cut case of morality rather than a question of order in the Church. This raises the stakes considerably. For another, on the previous issues the traditional/orthodox camp was divided pro and con. Many recognized that the Biblical evidence in reference to these debates was ambiguous and could be legitimately seen as supportive of both sides. This had the effect of limiting outright opposition to a relatively small section of the Church. It also made compromise and accommodation possible even when one personally felt others to be in error. *It cannot be stressed enough that this is not the case in the matter of homosexuality.*

Traditional/orthodox believers in the ACC are, with very few exceptions, at one in their opposition to the acceptance of homosexual practice. They see it as contrary to God's will and thus sinful. They are convinced that the Scripture relevant to this issue is both clear and unequivocal. Because these Anglicans are committed to the authority of the Bible in matters of faith and practice, any stand taken contrary to this by the General Synod or by the House of Bishops will put them into an impossibly awkward position. Acceptance of the new Marriage Canon will do just that.

They would then be part of a Church which, for the first time, had in their view officially departed from the Scriptures in a matter of doctrine. For them it would be on the same level as an official denial of the doctrine of the Trinity. The Church would finally have put itself over the Bible. This is the real issue. Homosexual marriage is not the sin of all sins but that is not the point. Accepting it would mean that the ACC had finally taken the step many have feared it would ultimately take, given the dominance of liberalism in its ranks. It could have been taken in reference to any other clearly biblical doctrine. And it may yet in time to come.

*In taking such action the ACC would, in the eyes of its traditional/orthodox members, officially abandon the view of Scripture and its authority which has been the theological foundation of the catholic church from the beginning.*

As I have pointed out, this foundation has already been abandoned by the liberal wing of the Church. Once the Church is willing deliberately to set aside the traditional understanding of Scripture, what we believe and practice as a Church will be determined by the current consensus. It will be revealed by a majority vote in the General Synod and will become the "truth" no matter what Scripture says and what the church has always taught. With experience as the guide there is literally no telling in what direction the Church will go and there is no way to direct it except through the use of raw political power.

This is not the kind of Church in which many traditional/orthodox Christians could feel comfortable for very long. While the facade of the "official doctrine of the Church" remained in place it was possible for them to function as Anglicans with a reasonable degree of integrity. For many years they have been at odds with what has been going on behind the scenes but have been content to get on with the job of ministry, letting others involve themselves in the politics of the Church.

Those others have tended to be more liberal, predisposed to see the Kingdom as a matter of social and political action and so become more involved in church government and bureaucracy. Therefore, it is partly through its own neglect that the traditional/orthodox camp finds itself on the outside looking in as far as power in the Church is concerned. (They are a minority in any event.) Now, with the possibility of a serious departure from the faith on the horizon, its sense of alienation is exacerbated by an almost overwhelming sense of powerlessness. This is a recipe for mass defection.

There are several other reasons to think that the acceptance of homosexual practice will result in many feeling they have no option but to leave the ACC. For some it will be a simple case of not

wanting to be part of a Church that is officially affirming as right and good what they consider to be sinful. It is one thing to know that some in the Church have departed from the faith. It is quite another to realize the Church itself has done so. This would be too much, indicating the ACC had fallen into schism.

They would see in such acceptance the official abandonment of Scripture as the rule of faith and this would cast a serious shadow over any claim of the ACC to be part of the church universal. According to the Thirty-nine Articles, "The visible Church is a congregation of faithful men, which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ's ordinance..." (XIX, p.706, BCP). Certainly, on this basis most would agree that the ACC had little theological claim to be the same Church as Cranmer and Hooker and the Book of Common Prayer.

For those who are thinking that I am exaggerating the problem or even using liberalism as a kind of scapegoat, consider this: no fewer than five diocesan bishops have departed our denomination for the Anglican Network in Canada soon after their retirement. Whatever one thinks of the validity of their reasons (all directly linked to liberalism), these defections are unprecedented in our history and must be taken as a sign that there is indeed a serious problem in our midst. As if the very formation of ANiC was not serious enough! Are we just going to ignore all this? Do we not care that our Church is breaking apart with great pain before our very eyes?

For various reasons the advance of liberalism has been quicker in the Episcopal Church (ECUSA) than in Canada. If we want to see what may be coming here next, we just have to look south of the border. There, no less than five diocesan bishops have departed ECUSA and taken a good part of their dioceses (Pittsburgh, South Carolina, San Joaquin, Quincy and Fort Worth) with them into the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA, which has also admitted ANiC as a Diocese).

Other Episcopal dioceses, formerly associated with these five, Albany, Dallas, Springfield, Central Florida and Rio Grande, while sympathetic, did not join them in leaving. ECUSA's leadership has responded, not with a serious look at themselves, but with lawsuits and vigorous attempts to

recover “their” properties from those who left. They would rather proceed with their agenda than reconsider their commitments in light of the breakup of their Church. They have already bet the farm.

All this has not gone unnoticed in the Anglican Communion itself. While the majority of its member Churches are very sympathetic to the conservative theology of ACNA, it has not (yet) recognized the latter as a bona fide Province of the Communion. While there are procedural difficulties in so doing, a number of the Primates of member Provinces have declared their Churches to be in full communion with ACNA and refuse to acknowledge ECUSA!

An association of conservative Anglican Provinces called the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON), representing a majority of Anglicans worldwide, has admitted ACNA as one of *its* Provinces. Indeed, the Lambeth Conference of 1998 rejected “...homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, call[ing] on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals...” in Resolution 1.10.

Furthermore, the Archbishop of Canterbury called the Primates of the Communion together in January 2016 to explore what should be done about the decision of ECUSA to permit the marriage of homosexual persons and the developments in Canada toward the same end. Significantly, Archbishop Foley Beach, head of the breakaway ACNA in the US and Canada, was invited and took part in this meeting. Some of these Primates demanded the actual eviction of ECUSA and ACC from the Anglican Communion! While this did not happen, 2/3 of the 37 Primates present approved imposing sanctions on ECUSA as the following portion of their communique indicates:

It is our unanimous desire to walk together. However given the seriousness of these matters we formally acknowledge this distance by requiring that for a period of three years The Episcopal Church no longer represent us on ecumenical and interfaith bodies, should not be appointed or elected to an internal standing committee and that while participating



in the internal bodies of the Anglican Communion, they will not take part in decision making on any issues pertaining to doctrine or polity.

Apparently, the reason for the three-year period was to give ECUSA the opportunity to reconsider its position at its next General Convention. Since this is extremely unlikely, it looks like ECUSA is liable to either come under greater and long-lasting sanctions or even be evicted from the Communion altogether.

And so the fracturing continues, putting a lot more farms on the table.