

*Russ Ingersoll's Response to Dave Schofield on the Subject of
Homosexuality and the Episcopal Church*

[Note: Russ **Ingersoll**, an Episcopal minister, though today perhaps more of a golf addict and retired headmaster, has written at some length in response to Dave Schofield's statement. Here is the full text of Russ's letter, part of which was published in the February Newsletter.]

I am writing chiefly in response to the excerpt of Bishop's Shofield's pastoral letter to his diocese included in our most recent newsletter. I recognize that Bishop Shofield did not himself submit the entry to our newsletter, but its appearance in our newsletter begs a response. The election, ratification, and now the consecration of an openly gay bishop is convulsing our church, even as the recent court opinion in Massachusetts is threatening to dominate our political debate.

We in the Episcopal Church in America have been wrestling with the issue of homosexuality for many years. Yet when the Diocese of New Hampshire acted to elect an openly gay person as their bishop and our General Convention subsequently ratified that election, many in our church felt blind-sided and unprepared to deal with its implications.

There are understandable reasons why many felt this way. While the church may have had the issue under study and prayer for many years, at the grass roots level there was little open, candid, and deep exploration of the issue. This failure, too, has understandable reasons. Sex in general is a topic about which there is universal interest but precious little talk in polite circles, and homosexuality viewed as an "abnormal sexual orientation" is an even more uncomfortable topic of conversation.

What conversations have taken place have been of two types. In the majority of cases people of like minds, similar experiences, and the same sexual orientation talk to each other with the effect of reinforcing their own views. In the second type conversation persons on opposite sides of the issue talk at each other with ears and hearts closed. Neither conversation is a very promising channel for the Holy Spirit or for the apprehension of truth.

A very wise man and highly respected theologian, Walter Brueggemann, has identified correctly why this issue has upset so many and so divided our church. It is not chiefly about sex, he suggests, though sex complicates the

issue. What it is really about, he asserts, is chaos. A primary concern of religion has always been to help society establish and maintain a “cosmos” or order to make sense of our experience and fortify us against all the forces of chaos that threaten our corporate life.

Whenever someone or something arises to threaten the established sense of order, society and the church feel the foundations of their worldview begin to shake. The people themselves are shaken with fear that their world (and they with it) may be destroyed. Such was the situation when Galileo challenged the prevailing (and traditional) worldview defended by the church of his day. Such was it when Jesus himself challenged the worldview of his own religion and people by asserting that the Kingdom of God embraced gentiles as well as Jews, the “unclean” as well as the “clean.” Similarly when the institution of slavery was challenged, many good men and women feared that the foundations of their life were being destroyed and that they would be swept away in the chaotic flood that would most assuredly follow. Even what seems like such a minor and obvious shift in church practice – the ordination of women – just twenty-five years ago was then viewed by many as a threat to church order and was denounced as an heretical opposition to the testimony of scripture and tradition.

Yet today our worldview has been enlarged to accommodate each of these once radical perceptions of God’s reality. We have found that when the foundations of our cosmos are shaken by truth what follows is not a chaotic, life-destroying flood but a larger, more comprehensive order. In hindsight it is much easier to see that the new reality that once shook our foundations was not to be feared but to be embraced. For the pioneers, however, it is always a fearsome and uncertain passage.

It is good that we contend over these fundamental issues, for in faithful and respectful contention with one another the issues are more likely to be proven. Without these theological and moral debates, anybody’s bias might posture as truth uncontested. The result would most assuredly be heresy, chaos, or both.

The Anglican Communion has long been recognized as that part of Christendom that does not insist on theological or doctrinal congruence on all matters of faith. We have always held some very strongly opposing views in creative tension through which new insights and fresh glimpses of the Holy have been gained. Because we have always had to live in communion with brothers and sisters in the faith who differed sharply on many issues of

the faith, the Anglican Communion has tended to be a humble communion, rarely claiming to know the mind of God but seeking God's truth diligently and persistently "come whence it may, cost what it will."

The greatest danger of the present threat of "schism" in our church is not the loss of numbers but the loss of this creative and essential tension. There are plenty of confessing types of churches where being like-mindedness on matters of doctrine and faith can be found. We do not need yet another variation on that theme. What we need is a church that will remain in communion through this present controversy and disagreement...and those that will most certainly follow. What we need is a church strong and courageous enough "to seek the truth come whence it may, cost what it will." What we need is a church loving enough to be willing to live together through difficult times trusting in God ultimately to prevail, to confirm the truth, and then to bind up our wounds. The Church of God does not need another divorce.

We need to trust God more and not be so certain and self-righteous about our own theological positions. Perhaps we need to return to the principle that the Pharisee Gamaliel articulated in the fifth chapter of Acts, when he counseled his fellow religious leaders to be cautious before condemning the apostles for the heretical views and actions. Citing earlier movements within Judaism that appeared threatening but ultimately failed, he counseled: "So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and leave them alone; for if this plan or undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God." Good counsel for the religious!

Now as to my own views on this matter of the place of homosexuals in the life of the church (and in the life of our country, for that matter), I must confess that my views, dramatically changed from those I held not too many years ago, are held in "fear and trembling." Though Dave Schofield and I represent opposite poles on this issue, he makes a very important point on which I can agree. He states in a pastoral aside to the gay and lesbian members of his congregations that "I am fully aware that there are those who are homosexual persons in our own congregations. Surely they must be hearing this pastoral letter with dismay. I must add that *one's sexual orientation has never been considered a matter for judgment*" (italics mine).

I am encouraged to see that there is acknowledgment that a person's *sexual orientation is not a choice but a given*, a part of one's nature. Of the

approximately ten percent of the population that is homosexually oriented the overwhelming majority has not chosen that orientation but has had to accept it and live with it as best they can.

Now if sexual orientation is a “given” and we can agree on that, the Christian must say that the “given” is in fact a gift of God. As a gift of God it is good – neither to be denied, “kept under a bushel” nor vilified. Further, if it is one’s nature, then for that person surely his or her sexual orientation is “natural,” and if both “natural” and a “gift” who are we to say that the exercise and expression of this gift is sin?

At this point those who find fault in my position are likely to quote scripture to disprove my view. I would caution those who quote scripture to end the discussion on this issue. Scripture cuts in many different directions, and all who employ scripture interpret it by some agreed upon set of principles. We also employ scripture selectively, focusing on what bolsters our view and avoiding that which is complicating or tending to refute our view.

In this context it is enough for me to point out that scripture and Jesus in particular have very little to say on this issue, and what is said is ambiguous at best. Yes, the Holiness Code of Leviticus is quite clear and strong, recommending death to the man who “lies with a man as with a woman.” But then there is much in the Holiness Code that is equally clear and strong that nobody today accepts or practices. Similarly the lynch-pin passage in the New Testament in Romans 1 does not use the word “homosexual” at all but rather employs “phooskos” meaning “natural” and its negative whose meaning is “unnatural.” It appears that he was condemning the heterosexual who engages in orgiastic, same sex play and experimentation that oppose one’s true sexual nature. I doubt Paul and his generation recognized, as many now do, that there is always a small minority of God’s beloved who were created with a sexual nature that responds to those of the same sex.

While scripture can be helpful and illuminating on this issue, it does not speak conclusively. Indeed, I would hold that the task of the church is to try to apprehend faithfully the “living word of the living God” – a word contained in scripture but not confined to it. As that “living word” of truth has been channeled to us in former times through such persons as Galileo and Martin Luther King, Jr., so it is always seeking to break through to enhance and enlarge our apprehension of God’s whole truth and his will for us.

That is what our church is presently struggling to discern. I am hopeful that we will be able to remain in communion with one another and that through that communion we will be able to maintain a prayerful, considerate, and respectful dialog through which God's "living word" may be channeled to us and the truth (whatever it is) confirmed.

I recognize that our newsletter may not be the place for this dialog to take place, but since the conversation was begun, I thought I ought not to turn a deaf ear. I leave it to you, Denny, to decide what to do with this.