

Why I Walked

Sometimes loving a denomination requires you to fight

By J.I. Packer

In June 2002, the synod of the Anglican Diocese of New Westminster authorized its bishop to produce a service for blessing same-sex unions, to be used in any parish of the diocese that requests it. A number of synod members walked out to protest the decision. They declared themselves out of communion with the bishop and the synod, and they appealed to the Archbishop of Canterbury and other Anglican primates and bishops for help. J.I. Packer was one such member who walked out. He shares his story here.

Why did I walk out with the others? Because this decision, taken in its context, falsifies the gospel of Christ, abandons the authority of Scripture, jeopardizes the salvation of fellow human beings, and betrays the church in its God-appointed role as the bastion and bulwark of divine truth.

My primary authority is a Bible writer named Paul. For many decades now, I have asked myself at every turn of my theological road: Would Paul be with me in this? What would he say if he were in my shoes? I have never dared to offer a view on anything that I did not have good reason to think he would endorse.

In 1 Corinthians we find the following, addressed it seems to exponents of some kind of antinomian spirituality:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God (6:9-11, ESV).

To make sure we grasp what Paul is saying here, I pose some questions.

First: What is Paul talking about in this vice list? Answer: Lifestyles, regular behavior patterns, habits of mind and action. He has in view not single lapses followed by repentance, forgiveness, and greater watchfulness (with God's help) against recurrence, but ways of life in which some of his readers were set, believing that for Christians there was no harm in them.

Second: What is Paul saying about these habits? Answer: They are ways of sin that, if not repented of and forsaken, will keep people out of God's kingdom of salvation. Clearly, self-indulgence and self-service, free from self-discipline and self-denial, is the attitude they express, and a lack of moral discernment lies at their heart.

Third: What is Paul saying about homosexuality? Answer: Those who claim to be Christ's should avoid the practice of same-sex physical connection for orgasm, on the model of heterosexual intercourse. Paul's phrase, "men who practice homosexuality," covers two Greek words for the parties involved in these acts. The first, *arsenokoitai*, means literally "male-bedders," which seems clear enough. The second, *malakoi*, is used in many connections to mean "unmanly," "womanish," and "effeminate," and here refers to males matching the woman's part in physical sex.

In this context, in which Paul has used two terms for sexual misbehavior, there is really no room for doubt regarding what he has in mind. He must have known, as Christians today know, that some men are sexually drawn to men rather than women, but he is not speaking of inclinations, only of behavior, what has more recently been called acting out. His point is that Christians need to resist these urges, since acting them out cannot please God and will reveal lethal impenitence. Romans 1:26 shows that Paul would have spoken similarly about lesbian acting out if he had had reason to mention it here.

Fourth: What is Paul saying about the gospel? Answer: Those who, as lost sinners, cast themselves in genuine faith on Christ and so receive the Holy Spirit, as all Christians do (see Gal. 3:2), find transformation through the transaction. They gain cleansing of conscience (the washing of forgiveness), acceptance with God (justification), and strength to resist and not act out the particular temptations they experience (sanctification). As a preacher friend declared to his congregation, "I want you to know that I am a non-practicing adulterer." Thus he testified to receiving strength from God.

With some of the Corinthian Christians, Paul was celebrating the moral empowering of the Holy Spirit in heterosexual terms; with others of the Corinthians, today's homosexuals are called to prove, live out, and celebrate the moral empowering of the Holy Spirit in homosexual terms. Another friend, well known to me for 30 years, has lived with homosexual desires all his adult life, but remains a faithful husband and father, sexually chaste, through the power of the Holy Spirit, according to the gospel. He is a model in every way. We are all sexually tempted, one way or another, yet we may all tread the path of chastity through the Spirit's enablement, and thereby please God.

Missing Paul's point

As one who assumes the full seriousness and sincerity of all who take part in today's debates among Christians regarding homosexuality, both in New Westminster and elsewhere, I now must ask: how can anyone miss the force of what Paul says here? There are, I think, two ways in which this happens.

One way, the easier one to deal with, is the way of special exegesis: I mean interpretations that, however possible, are artificial and not natural, but that allow one to say, "What Paul is condemning is not my sort of same-sex union." Whether a line of interpretation is artificial, so constituting misinterpretation, is, I grant, a matter of personal judgment. I do not, however, know how any reasonable person could read Robert A. J. Gagnon's 500-page book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and*

Hermeneutics (Abingdon, 2001), and not conclude that any exegesis evading the clear meaning of Paul is evasive indeed. Nor from now on can I regard anyone as qualified to debate homosexuality who has not come to terms with Gagnon's encyclopedic examination of all the relevant passages and all the exegetical hypotheses concerning them. I have not always agreed with James Barr, but when on the dust jacket he describes Gagnon's treatise as "indispensable even for those who disagree with the author," I think he is absolutely right.

The second way, which is harder to engage, is to let experience judge the Bible. Some moderns, backed by propaganda from campaigners for homosexual equality, and with hearts possessed by the pseudo-Freudian myth that you can hardly be a healthy human without active sexual expression, feel entitled to say: "Our experience is—in other words, we feel—that gay unions are good, so the Bible's prohibitions of gay behavior must be wrong." The natural response is that the Bible is meant to judge our experience rather than the other way around, and that feelings of sexual arousal and attraction, generating a sense of huge significance and need for release in action as they do, cannot be trusted as either a path to wise living or a guide to biblical interpretation. Rhyming the point to make what in my youth was called a grook: the sweet bright fire / of sexual desire / is a dreadful liar. But more must be said than that.

Two views of the Bible

At issue here is a Grand Canyon-wide difference about the nature of the Bible and the way it conveys God's message to modern readers. Two positions challenge each other.

One is the historic Christian belief that through the prophets, the incarnate Son, the apostles, and the writers of canonical Scripture as a body, God has used human language to tell us definitively and transculturally about his ways, his works, his will, and his worship. Furthermore, this revealed truth is grasped by letting the Bible interpret itself to us from within, in the knowledge that the way into God's mind is through that of the writers. Through them, the Holy Spirit who inspired them teaches the church. Finally, one mark of sound biblical insights is that they do not run counter to anything else in the canon.

This is the position of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, and of evangelicals and other conservative Protestants. There are differences on the place of the church in the interpretive process, but all agree that the process itself is essentially as described. I call this the *objectivist* position.

The second view applies to Christianity the Enlightenment's trust in human reason, along with the fashionable evolutionary assumption that the present is wiser than the past. It concludes that the world has the wisdom, and the church must play intellectual catch-up in each generation in order to survive. From this standpoint, everything in the Bible becomes relative to the church's evolving insights, which themselves are relative to society's continuing development (nothing stands still), and the Holy Spirit's teaching ministry is to help the faithful see where Bible doctrine shows the cultural limitations of

the ancient world and needs adjustment in light of latter-day experience (encounters, interactions, perplexities, states of mind and emotion, and so on). Same-sex unions are one example. This view is scarcely 50 years old, though its antecedents go back much further. I call it the *subjectivist* position.

In the New Westminster debate, subjectivists say that what is at issue is not the authority of Scripture, but its interpretation. I do not question the sincerity of those who say this, but I have my doubts about their clear-headedness. The subjectivist way of affirming the authority of Scripture, as the source of the teaching that now needs to be adjusted, is precisely a denying of Scripture's authority from the objectivist point of view, and clarity requires us to say so. The relative authority of ancient religious expertise, now to be revamped in our post-Christian, multi-faith, evolving Western world, is one view. The absolute authority of God's unchanging utterances, set before us to be learned, believed, and obeyed as the mainstream church has always done, never mind what the world thinks, is the other.

What are represented as different "interpretations" are in fact reflections of what is definitive: in the one view, the doctrinal and moral teaching of Scripture is always final for Christian people; in the other view, it never is. What is definitive for the exponents of that view is not what the Bible says, as such, but what their own minds come up with as they seek to make Bible teaching match the wisdom of the world.

Each view of biblical authority sees the other as false and disastrous, and is sure that the long-term welfare of Christianity requires that the other view be given up and left behind as quickly as possible. The continuing conflict between them, which breaks surface in the disagreement about same-sex unions, is a fight to the death, in which both sides are sure that they have the church's best interests at heart. It is most misleading, indeed crass, to call this disagreement simply a difference about interpretation, of the kind for which Anglican comprehensiveness has always sought to make room.

Spiritual dangers

In addition, major spiritual issues are involved. To bless same-sex unions liturgically is to ask God to bless them and to enrich those who join in them, as is done in marriage ceremonies. This assumes that the relationship, of which the physical bond is an integral part, is intrinsically good and thus, if I may coin a word, *blessable*, as procreative sexual intercourse within heterosexual marriage is. About this assumption there are three things to say.

First, it entails *deviation* from the biblical gospel and the historic Christian creed. It distorts the doctrines of creation and sin, claiming that homosexual orientation is good since gay people are made that way, and rejecting the idea that homosexual inclinations are a spiritual disorder, one more sign and fruit of original sin in some people's moral system. It distorts the doctrines of regeneration and sanctification, calling same-sex union a Christian relationship and so affirming what the Bible would call salvation in sin rather than from it.

Second, it threatens *destruction* to my neighbor. The official proposal said that ministers who, like me, are unwilling to give this blessing should refer gay couples to a minister willing to give it. Would that be pastoral care? Should I not try to help gay people change their behavior, rather than to anchor them in it? Should I not try to help them to the practice of chastity, just as I try to help restless singles and divorcees to the practice of chastity? Do I not want to see them all in the kingdom of God?

Third, it involves the *delusion* of looking to God—actually asking him—to sanctify sin by blessing what he condemns. This is irresponsible, irreverent, indeed blasphemous, and utterly unacceptable as church policy. How could I do it?

Changing a historical tradition

Finally, a major change in Anglicanism is involved: Writing into a diocesan constitution something that Scripture, canonically interpreted, clearly and unambiguously rejects as sin. This has never been done before, and ought not to be done now.

All the written standards of post-Reformation Anglicanism have been intentionally biblical and catholic. They have been biblical in terms of the historic view of the nature and authority of Scripture. They have been catholic in terms of the historic consensus of the mainstream church.

Many individual eccentricities and variations may have been tolerated in practice. The relatively recent controversial permissions to remarry the divorced and make women presbyters arguably had biblical warrant, though minorities disputed this. In biblical and catholic terms, however, the New Westminster decision writes legitimation of sin into the diocese's constitutional standards.

It categorizes the tolerated abstainers as the awkward squad of eccentrics rather than the mainstream Anglicans that they were before. It is thus a decision that can only be justified in terms of biblical relativism, the novel notion of biblical authority that to my mind is a cuckoo in the Anglican nest and a heresy in its own right. It is a watershed decision for world Anglicanism, for it changes the nature of Anglicanism itself. It has to be reversed.

Luther's response at Worms when he was asked to recant all his writings echoes in my memory, as it has done for more than 50 years:

'Unless you prove to me by Scripture and plain reason that I am wrong, I cannot and will not recant. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. To go against conscience is neither right nor safe [it endangers the soul]. Here I stand. There is nothing else I can do. God help me. Amen.'

Conscience is that power of the mind over which we have no power, which binds us to believe what we see to be true and do what we see to be right. Captivity of to the Word

of God, that is, to the absolutes of God's authoritative teaching in the Bible, is integral to authentic Christianity.

More words from Luther come to mind:

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point that the world and the devil are at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages is where the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is merely flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.

Was the protest in order? Was "no" the right way to vote? Did faithfulness to Christ, and faithful confession of Christ, require it? It seems so. And if so, then our task is to stand fast, watch, pray, and fight for better things: for the true authority of the Bible, for the "true truth" of the gospel, and for the salvation of gay people for whom we care.

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