A QUESTION FOR PROGRESSIVE EPISCOPALIANS

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Chief among the claims now made by The Episcopal Church (TEC) is that it is an inclusive church that is open to a variety of opinions and practices. This self-definition is an updated version of the traditional claim that Anglicanism represents a *via media* between extremes of one sort or another—Catholic/Protestant, liberal/conservative, modern/traditional, etc. The simple fact is, however, that the policies and actions of the progressive leadership of The Episcopal Church have exposed the false nature of these claims, at least as in so far as they are applied to TEC.

The false nature of the claim is easy to see. The logic used by progressive Episcopalians to explain and justify TEC’s “inclusive” agenda is in point of fact necessarily “exclusive” of contrary opinion. How so? The standard justification for the inclusive agenda is almost without exception stated in terms of **justice**. That is, behind efforts to change church practice in respect of the blessing of unions between persons of the same gender and the ordination in persons in faithful and permanent same sex unions is a firm belief that the **rights** of these brothers and sisters in the Lord are being violated by antiquated church practice—a practice that rests upon misinformation, fear, and prejudice. “It’s a justice issue” is a statement made again and again, and it is made in a way that is meant to end all argument and cast aspersions on the moral state of anyone defending a contrary opinion.

In the minds of progressive Episcopalians, to acquiesce in matters of injustice and to allow ignorance, fear, and prejudice to go unopposed is a betrayal of what to their mind is central to the Gospel message. Jesus in fact came “to preach good news to the poor…to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind and to set at liberty those who are oppressed…” (Lk. 4:18) The mission of the church in each age is to follow Jesus in this ministry.

One or another version of the progressive view summarized above has been stated repeatedly by none other than our Presiding Bishop, and it appears repeatedly on liberal blogs like Preludium and Episcopal Café. Indeed, claims that the Gospel is, almost without remainder, one of inclusive justice appears now to be beyond question in the minds of TEC’s leadership. The problem is many Episcopalians are made quite uneasy by a version of the Gospel that does not in all ways cohere with the one they received through Baptism and from the larger Anglican Communion. It seems to them that the Gospel of inclusion ironically excludes them.

In response to questions and objections that reflect this discomfort progressive Episcopalians might seek to reduce anxiety and blur the exclusive rather than inclusive logic now regnant among them by pointing to the actions of General Convention when a decision was taken to ordain women. A “conscience clause” was inserted into the legislation that allowed bishops to refuse women entry into these orders. So progressives might suggest that this action shows The Episcopal Church under their leadership to be indeed a broad and pluralistic church. They might say such a thing and even on occasion act upon it. However, the life of the conscience clause proved to be relatively short, and as a result at least two Episcopal Bishops have felt it necessary to lead their diocese out of The Episcopal Church. The reason given for this reversal of policy was “It’s a matter of justice!” Progressive logic in reality precludes allowance for any significant length of time for diversity in respect to the matters that lie at the heart of their agenda.

The very logic of the progressive position at best allows only for temporary measures of expediency designed to provide space and time to establish just practices without unduly disturbing the broad membership of the church. Time and space must be given for those slow of step to “catch up.” Nevertheless, those not in agreement with the progressive agenda of inclusion, after observing the present scene, will see the actions of progressive Episcopalians as shaped by a combination of a principled commitment to the justice agenda that can allow no compromise, and a pragmatic set of tactics designed to buy time and so make sure that they have sufficient power to enforce (as soon as expedient) what they hold to be the requirements of justice.

This admixture of principle and pragmatism is clearly evident in the course of action now being followed in respect to the internal governance of The Episcopal Church and in respect to its relations with other provinces of the Anglican Communion. The domestic agenda is to centralize power in the Office of the Presiding Bishop and the Executive Council and in so doing locate the dioceses of TEC as units subordinate to General Convention, the Executive Council, and the Office of the Presiding Bishop. This argument is precisely that being made by the Office of the Presiding Bishop in the present litigation in the Diocese of Pittsburgh. It is also a strategy abundantly obvious in the use now being made of the “Abandonment Canon.” These moves are in the one case unconstitutional and in the other un-canonical. Both open the way to enforce conformity in respect to justice issues TEC’s progressive leadership deem central to the Gospel.

Domestically, progressive Episcopalians seek more centralized authority, particularly in the Office of the Presiding Bishop. Internationally, however, they plead for pluralism in the form of a polycentric communion that allows for wide variations in belief and practice. It is on this level that they still plead for pluralism, but not, in any credible sense, on a domestic level. The plea for pluralism on an international level is but a tactic to protect moves toward centralization and uniformity domestically.

Despite the fact that there is a logical contradiction in arguing for increased centralism on the one hand and increased diversity on the other, this strategy was clearly evident at the recent meeting of The Anglican Consultative Council where TEC’s representatives sought to derail the fourth section of the draft covenant that provides for consequences if Provinces act in ways other members of the Communion believe not in accord with Christian belief and practice. Nevertheless, given the logic of a Gospel of justice, one can only view TEC’s pleading for pluralism as tactical—a prudential adjustment until such time as TEC has accrued sufficient power within the councils of the Communion to gain acceptance, or at least tolerance, of its views about these matters of justice.

For the moment I will leave aside the many problems that attach to TEC’s press for a polycentric communion. It is enough to say that their argument will work only if communion excludes common belief and practice but focuses instead on cooperation in good works and mutual aid. (Though even here, because of conflicting theological commitments, “good works” can be construed quite differently) Of more immediate importance is the logic of inclusive justice. The logic of inclusion employed by progressive Episcopalians excludes meaningful opposition from the start.

This exclusion is of such importance that it must not go unchallenged. It is a matter that concerns all Episcopalians. Exclusion of meaningful opposition in respect to the matters now before The Episcopal Church in the end will produce a niche church rather than a catholic church. Progressive claims to inclusivity are in fact false. The logic of their position drives relentlessly toward an increasingly constricted identity. The question progressive Episcopalians must answer is why members of the Episcopal Church that do not share their views ought to think otherwise. To put the issue more directly, progressive Episcopalians need to show the membership of their church and the rest of the Anglican Communion why their position does not end in an exclusive form of church life rather than a diverse one. This observation leads to a direct question. The question is what reason can be given from the point of view of progressive Episcopalians to a traditional Anglican for being a member of The Episcopal Church. I certainly have my own reasons and have stated them on many occasions. But progressive Episcopalians have claimed something that both their words and actions belie, and it seems only right for them to confront and explain this inconsistency to the rest of us.