

16 June 2007

Dear General Synod Delegate,

About a month before General Synod all Synod delegates received in the mail a copy of John Thorp's Paper, *Making the Case, the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions in the Anglican Church of Canada*. There was no covering letter, no indication of who was distributing this and why, no explanation of how the complete mailing list was obtained, etc. Nevertheless it is a superb discussion paper. It would have done so much good to distribution this paper a full year before General Synod, to allow a thoughtful exploration of the issues it raises. At any rate, here are a few comments that immediately were made in a discussion group in the Maritimes around the Thorp article. This discussion group included folk on both sides of the issue. The point is not to argue for or against – but to consider Thorp's arguments – has he really 'Made the Case' in a convincing way? Perhaps GS delegates will find the following comments helpful? You will quickly see that these notes are scattered and not properly ordered (embarrassingly so such that we do not our names to be attached to these notes!) – some are incomplete thoughts and bare suggestions. But the bizarre and unfortunate manner of distribution of John Thorp's paper to all GS delegates suggests that some response – inadequate and last minute as may be, is required. GWAT

- The centre of Thorp's argument is that both sexual difference and sexual orientation are morally neutral. This might well be true, but it what needs to be shown, not assumed. He does not actually demonstrate this but merely provides a history with this view as the contemporary result.
- Thorp's paper is misleading because it avoids talk of same-sex marriage as the only legitimate Anglican form, at least in Canada, where the legal apparatus is in place to allow this. Thorp does mention in a footnote that the blessing of same sex unions in Canada makes sense to apply to those who are civilly married, but the paper itself exclusively speaks of 'unions'. Thorp's motive seems to be political: a) because it will be more problematic for some and b) it would require the "slow" process to actually institute it and Thorp is convinced of the need to recognize gay and lesbian relations now, even if inadequately. Everyone is impatient for this question to be settled. But it must be done with integrity.
- The whole of General Synod (both those opposed and those against same-sex unions) must admit that what we are talking about here is same-sex marriage - only same-sex marriage will be adequate to those who desire 'same-sex blessings' – the stop-gap of 'same-sex unions' and the blessing of same-sex unions' has become dated by events in the secular world, at least in Canada where same-sex couples are married in civil law. Let's be honest about what this is about – all sides require this, not the least our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in Christ who desire their union to be recognized as Christian marriage.
- Thorp's paper cannot be considered a properly theological account - rather it is the work of a philosopher who seeks to undermine the integrity of all explicitly theological principles, to allow for the expression of a secular rationality and affirmation – the standard of 'harm and harmless' that he uses is only secular - both the harmlessness of same sex unions and the harm being done to homosexuals by the failure of the church to adequately "recognize" their unions.
- So what is required is still a properly theological reflection - a use of reason, which is not simply one-sidedly secular, but in which the church retains its integrity and independence while recognizing its exposure and obligation to deeply consider secular reason and historical development.
- Why is there such impatience in Thorp's paper? It is born out of a moral demand certainly, but one that has not opened itself, except on its own terms to the deeper history of theological reflection. The

supposition here is that any such exposure is only exposure to prejudice - this is but the mirror of the traditionalist who flees exposure to secular rationality. The Church to be truly comprehensive needs to be on both sides here - there is little evidence it has been. But the dismissal of real theological reflection is a pyrrhic victory, for in the end it is the dismissal of the church - the supposition that theology properly speaking cannot draw into itself and be both informed by and informative of secular reason. The deeper issue here is not the rights and recognition of gay persons - secular society will take care of that as it took care of slavery and usury, of divorce and remarriage - the deeper issue is the mind of the church and whether it has one that can be different from the secular culture in which the Church is situated.

- The questions of usury and slavery need to be considered more critically. Considering the difference between the change in view about usury and the proposed changes in understanding or discipline with regard to sexual morality would be very helpful. This is complex – clearly certain forms of charging interest are not viewed as lawful or acceptable to a Christian, and there are significant historical and social questions involved, not to mention the problems with the modern economic order that has led to a type of boundless Consumerism, a Global economy which destroys cultures and moral values based on anything other than economics, and global warming.
- It may be that usury needed to be revisited at the end of the middle ages and especially at the beginning of the industrial revolution. But the horrors of the industrial revolution and our present concerns about the environment and the limits of growth suggest that there was a great deal more to be said about the position of the medieval Church on the subject than was considered at the time. An impatience and unwillingness to think - a revolutionary fervour - transformed the Western world with a power that was often blind by choice. It is a cautionary tale rather than a healthy example to be followed.
- What Thorp says about slavery is wrong in an important way. The letter to Philemon shows that Christian faith/ doctrine ultimately makes slavery unacceptable. There is a unity between the Spirit and letter. To say that Scripture only regulates slavery shows his general view that the Scripture does not offer clarity about the sexual questions under discussion.
- Thorp's comments about the Trinity in the preface is an ancient form of heresy called 'modalism'. Thorp suggests that the work of the Father was in creation, the Son's main work of redemption was done 2000 years ago, and the Spirit's main work now. The Athanasian Creed (part of our 'core' doctrine!) specifically and clearly affirms that this is heretical, unscriptural and wrong. Thorp uses this misguided notion of the Trinity to suggest that the work of the Holy Spirit is somehow distinct from Christ, and hence from the Word of God written.
- Thorp mixes up scientific discovery, insight and assumption, pointing out for example, the progress made in distinguishing homosexual behaviour from a necessary connection to a variety of pathologies, and then going on to suggest that once those distinctions are made, it is inevitable that one see that homosexual behaviour is acceptable. This is simply faulty logic.
- Thorp does not acknowledge that nature can both serve as an instrument of revelation and why it is insufficient to do so of itself. The mere existence of homosexual activity in nature can be an expression of the fall rather than a sign of what is good – that is, of 'disordered' love (but note, of 'love' for sure and without doubt) rather than 'ordered' love. All forms of 'love' do not fall under the category of 'marriage'.
- For Thorp, the conclusion is straightforward and obvious. Even more, it is argued, this has to be done if Anglicans are to be faithful to their tradition. *"The blessing of same-sex unions is the Anglican thing to do. It is not just that we may do so – it is that we must do so."* But is it really so straightforward? There is no room for any other view and the classical teaching about marriage is given short-shrift. The

argument for equating the marriage of a man and a woman with same-sex partnerings is advanced on the strength of one thing, namely, “*changing cultural circumstances*” in one culture – the North American – which the argument requires to be accepted by all other cultures. This is unthoughtful.

- Thorp’s paper touches directly upon a number of areas that need to be thoughtfully and theologically examined. The paper should be seen as a contribution to the continuing debate and not, as presented, a foreclosing on the possibilities of discussion.
- At best, Thorp’s paper is a philosophical contribution to a theological and pastoral matter. As a philosophical paper, however, it reflects a particular philosophical position that assumes the primacy of secular reason. But can it be argued that that is Hooker’s view, for instance? For Hooker there is no reason that operates independent of the divine reason. The treatment of the Fathers and the Medievals is also cursory and incomplete. Like the St. Michael Report, for instance, there is no mention of the sanctified forms of Christian friendship in the Christian tradition, such as the Greek rite *adelphopoiesis* or the Latin (Catholic) rite *Ordo ad fratres faciendum*, both of which distinguish the forms of covenanted friendship from the covenant of Christian marriage and bear witness to the voice of tradition on this vexed question.
- Privileging secular Reason over the principles of Scripture and Tradition leads to a settled conclusion which makes engagement difficult. Nonetheless, “*Making the Case*” deserves a more considered and respectful reply, both theologically and philosophically, because it brings out so clearly so many of the assumptions in our culture that challenge the fundamental doctrines of Christian orthodoxy and the forms of their expression.
- “*Making the Case*” is not the final statement but another example that reveals the tremendous confusion in the contemporary Anglican Communion about moral theology. There is work to be done!
- Thorp’s use of the Hooker and thus Anglican ‘three legged stool’ is misleading and not helpful. Mary Peterson Johnson, in a 1986 PHD thesis, concludes by saying, ‘Hooker’s unique contribution to Anglican theology on the question of the source of authority in the Church was not to replace the Reformation watchword “Scripture alone” with the formula, “Scripture, tradition, and reason.” Rather, he assigned reason and tradition a place as indispensable tools, provided by God himself, for the interpretation of that revelation of his plan of salvation as revealed uniquely in the Bible.’ (pp. 168-169).
- Thorp wants to believe that the marvellous riotous colour and variety of nature testifies to the goodness of God, but at the same time he is sceptical that we can draw conclusions from our knowledge of nature about nature’s Maker. This scepticism extends to the Bible and so to Christ Himself. He tells us that there is no need to decide between N.T. Wright and Marcus Borg on the question ‘whether the Bible is of divine inspiration or merely the record of a people’s reaction to its experience of the divine.’ (p. 17).
- Discussing slavery, Thorp says of those who opposed it that they had to go ‘behind’ the words of Scripture to a ‘deep meaning’ that contradicted the words. ‘Their deep Christianity contradicted the shallow religion of the biblical texts.’ (p. 9) Later he assures us that this same ‘deep meaning’ can ‘overcome’ the words of Scripture in the present debate. The despair of finding truth in Scripture is almost palpable here. What is this ‘deep meaning’ - the pith and substance of Christian faith and life? It is clear from the words just quoted that its source and measure is not in the Scripture, but in us, and specifically in our secular Reason and in our ‘sense’ of what is right and wrong – harmful and harmless.
- Does homoerotic behaviour among animals give us any indication of human conduct, and of God’s intention for human persons made in His image? Most animals are not monogamous either.