

## Communion and Knowledge in the Canons of the Episcopal Church

WILLIAM GLASS\*

*This paper aims to take the consecration of a practicing gay bishop in the Episcopal Church in 2004 as a case study in the church's discernment processes. First, the essay attempts a reading of the Episcopal Church formularies (Canons, Prayer Book, and Scripture) to derive a characteristically Anglican vision of theological epistemology—that is, whether and how the Episcopal Church can know the will of God. Second, assuming for the sake of argument that the disposition of the Lord on lifelong, monogamous homosexuality is favorable but that the wider Communion is as yet unaware of it, the essay then attempts to understand the Episcopal Church's decision-making processes in light of the epistemology just presented and to evaluate the epistemological consequences of such decision-making. Third, a possible solution is examined for its value both in se and as programmatic for conciliar navigation of future church controversies.*

As the great ecumenical century stretching from 1895 to about 1978 gave way to the new millennium, the Episcopal Church in the United States of America instantiated that century's struggle for unity in various ways. Social and political issues tested its mettle, and at several points, both clergy and laypeople found the diversity that came to exist within the church to be unbearable. Though it was not the first such dispute, the 2003 ordination of Bishop Gene Robinson as coadjutor in the Diocese of New Hampshire forced the issue of tolerable theological disagreement in a particularly acute way. Many dioceses and churches committed to traditional Christian teaching on human sexuality saw the ordination as evidence of the church's

---

\* William Glass is a student at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina, where he also serves as a deacon at All Saints Anglican Church in Durham/Chapel Hill (PEAR USA). He is currently writing a master's thesis on Pauline political theology.

intractable waywardness and left the Episcopal Church, laying claim for themselves to the American Anglican heritage.

By the end of the new millennium's first decade, the American landscape featured a variety of churches divided by a common Anglican tradition. Competing claims to legitimacy forced already-aggravated tensions over authority to a fever pitch, and the fever has not yet subsided. In fact, some doubt the resources of American Anglicanism at all to meet the crisis it faces. In response to such doubts, this paper will (I) conduct a theological reading of Title III in the Episcopal Church's Constitutions and Canons (C&C) as an attempt to glimpse how the church discerns the mind of the Lord and comes to know what it does not already know. It will then (II) take the ordination of Bishop Robinson and its fallout as a test case for acquiring knowledge in this way. Finally (III) it will evaluate the epistemological resources of the church to deal with divisive issues on the basis of (I) and (II). Such understanding may yield insight into the ways and means of successfully navigating controversy and disagreement in a deeply divided church.

## I

Admittedly, the canons are not usually consulted for theological investigation; their ordinary use is altogether more perfunctory. But there are at least a couple of reasons why such an approach might be fruitful. First, as will be demonstrated, the *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) explicitly understands the ordination of clergy as the end of the process in which the church discerns the will of God to call a particular person to ministry.<sup>1</sup> Thus, although Title III of the canons scarcely mentions God or discernment, insofar as the canons establish the BCP as the liturgical authority of the church, the admittedly procedural language of the canons with respect to ordination simply must be understood as specifying the discernment of a call to ministry, something which presumably God does and then reveals to the church. The bishop demands of the presenters that they present a suitable person, who models life upon the Holy Scriptures, by word

---

<sup>1</sup> See the bishop's prayer at the Consecration of a Deacon: "We praise you for the many ministries in your Church, and for calling this your servant to the order of deacons. Therefore, Father, through Jesus Christ your Son, give your Holy Spirit to N[ame]." *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal, 1979), 545, emphasis added.

and example, and whose affirmation of belief in a call the church can trust even as it echoes it. And Title III outlines the procedure to assist the church in answering that demand.

Secondly, although in any discernment on which the church might embark there are sure to be dis-analogies in various particulars, it is simply the case that in the church's formularies there are no other places from which one might hope to cull anything like a specific account of how the church thinks it can discern the will of God. Thus, in any act of church discernment, it stands as at least plausible that such discernment, whatever its differences, will bear analogy to that envisioned in Title III.

This analysis will therefore begin by reading what the canons stipulate specifically in cases where the truth of the matter is either not known or is liable of being lost. Specifically, the discernment processes related to ordination and the extensive measures taken to guarantee textual stability of the *Book of Common Prayer* are each precisely aimed either at the church's finding out what it does not know or preserving what it thinks it already knows—finding the will of God in one case and preserving it in the other. These two avenues of examination seem fruitful precisely because they represent points in C&C where there is a canonically prescribed means of acquiring or retaining the knowledge of God. From these two points, much may perhaps be gleaned for use in cases where the means of knowledge is not given a formal shape.

*I (a). Receiving Knowledge: Discernment of Vocation to Holy Orders*

“God willing and the people consenting”:<sup>2</sup> the discernment process for any prospective ordination candidate is aimed at nothing less than discovering the will of God veiled in the mind of the church. The church does not do this presumptuously, but humbly, at the invitation of God throughout Holy Scripture and the Prayer Book tradition, and with all awareness that the church may and does err. Even so, the church is promised the Spirit to lead and guide, so that it can trust that the will of God will (wondrously) be made known in its deliberations. Paul writes to the Corinthians, for example, that believers together have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16), and in Isaiah 1:18, the

---

<sup>2</sup> This commonplace from ordination announcements finds its canonical basis in the portion of the explicit consent of “the people” in the Order for Ordination of a Deacon (1979 BCP, 539).

prophet invites Israel to “argue it out together” with the Lord. And in the BCP’s Ember Day Prayer for the Ministry, the church calls upon God who “led [his] holy apostles to ordain ministers in every place” to grant that the church, “under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, may choose suitable persons for the ministry of Word and Sacrament.”<sup>3</sup> Canonically, this process requires the functioning of a variegated authority structure, a community of unevenly weighted voices, without which no candidate may be ordained. The church trusts that in the function of that community, by the faithfulness of God, “suitable persons” may be entrusted with authority and rule in the church. Indeed, the ministry of all the baptized is required for the right functioning of the church in all it does; but it is especially the case that the discernment of a minister is the business of the whole church, as the bishop’s charge at ordination makes explicit: “Dear friends in Christ, you know the importance of this ministry, and the weight of your responsibility in presenting *N.N.* for ordination to the sacred order of deacons. Therefore if any of you know any impediment or crime because of which we should not proceed, come forward now and make it known.”<sup>4</sup> The Order for the Ordination of a Deacon is instructive, for although the church believes that God is leading its mind in the discernment of an ordination candidate, it is the case even so that on one’s ordination day, new information may prevent the ordination. The bishop calls on the knowledge of the church because it is simply not within the bishop’s power to know all that is necessary for ordination to occur.

This discernment is provided for canonically in very careful terms—terms that are intended to create space not only for reliable marks of a call to ministry to show themselves but also for each call to take its own shape in the design of God. Thus, every diocese’s Commission on Ministry, whose job it is to assist the bishop in discernment for candidates (III.2.5), commits also to helping congregations develop a discernment process “appropriate to the cultural background, age, and life experiences” of the candidate (III.3.1). Indeed, the discernment process may catch the candidate unawares, since the canons do not assume the candidate to be aware of a call when the church begins to recognize one (III.3.2). So the church’s discernment will take account, in theory at least, of a variety of different scenarios

---

<sup>3</sup> 1979 BCP, 256.

<sup>4</sup> 1979 BCP, 539.

without determining in advance how it is that someone will come to know themselves as called to ministry. The wide range of possibilities on this score is matched to a process requiring people who are somewhat familiar with the circumstances of the candidate's life to be in conversation and prayer as the candidate moves on. These voices speak at different volumes throughout, and, as the process advances, more people enter the conversation. By the time a candidate reaches ordination, then, the canons envision a rich and thick network of prayer and listening to have gone into that ordination, such that not only is it clear *that* a person is called to ministry, but also there is some idea of the shape of that person's call.<sup>5</sup>

The canons thus envision the ordination process as a time of mutual education, in which the candidate himself, the bishop, the candidate's sponsoring congregation, and the various committees who interact with the process all learn together what the call of God for that individual is. Incredibly, the church believes that during this time a candidate's call, hidden in the counsel of God, becomes a thing in the mind of the "people" who recognize it to be so: the mind of Christ in the mind of the church. Their consent is defined as an attestation by all who have a voice, at their respective stages in the process, and in the end by the bishop leaning heavily on their collective witness, that "there is no sufficient objection on medical, psychological, moral, or spiritual grounds" and that precisely therefore "*they* recommend ordination" (III.6(c), emphasis added). The canons insist upon the affirmative answer of all of these voices. Disunity among them halts the process and requires further prayer and conversation.

Epistemologically, several features of this process merit analysis. First, reliable testimony at several layers plays an enormous role in filling out a potentially vague notion ("call") and tailoring it to the candidate and the uniqueness of any given minister's particular vocation. Second, although voices speak with differing levels of authority in the process, the canons assume that every one of those voices is needed for an ordination to occur; no one alone (not even a bishop) is possessed of sufficient knowledge to say with any conclusiveness that a person is called to ordination. Third, although a whole community speaks together in any discernment process, it is not therefore the

---

<sup>5</sup> See, at a minimum, Canon III.6.5(h), along with the provisions for the educational value of "life experience" (III.6.5(d)) and the reflection and feedback of the various communities to whom the candidate belongs in his or her formation.

case that all speak the same. Thus, for example, although an ordination cannot proceed without the consent of the “people”—first in the voice of the Standing Committee, and ultimately in the congregational affirmation on ordination day—it is the prerogative of a bishop to remove a candidate from the process at any point. So while a bishop is indebted to the community for the discernment process, the canons present the bishop as a guardian of unity in the church who therefore can act unilaterally, if not to affirm, at least to deny. Finally, while the canons do assume the candidate’s own awareness of a calling to have grown such that on the day of ordination the candidate can make the public statement of vocation (“I believe I am so called”<sup>6</sup>), nowhere is it presumed that this will be known with certainty, perhaps by anyone. This is of course the necessary consequence of knowledge mediated largely by the testimony of others—that is, knowledge by faith. There are reasonable grounds short of certainty, then, that justify the action taken—grounds that are appropriate to the action itself. This of course entails the inverse statement that uncertainty does not justify actions equally: doubt is a movement inside of the church’s faith, and there are more and less faithful responses to doubt.

The limitations on what humans can know are common to human beings across space and time. But lingering doubt about the will of God catalyzes further conversation, prayer, and continued conference with others until a right measure of clarity obtains. And the manifestation of that clarity to many people in differing ways is what allows the ordination to proceed. The community’s continued discernment and the candidate’s willing self-offering and patience open up the space within which Christian doubt about the mind of Christ subsides.

But what are the means of its subsiding? It is not necessarily true that ongoing conversation achieves any clarity. So the act of mutually discerning the will of God with an ordination candidate presses the question of what establishes that discernment process in the first place. What justifies the belief that continued mutual discernment will be fruitful? These questions point to a crucial dialogic relationship between the church’s current discernment and tradition: the “faith once delivered” only to be passed on again as a faithful rendering of the

---

<sup>6</sup> 1979 BCP, 543.

worldview within which “communities of discernment” come to make sense in the first place.

*I (b). The Preserve of Knowledge: Common Prayer and Common Sense*

For the Episcopal Church, there is no text whose custody and faithful reproduction are as amply provided for as the *Book of Common Prayer*. Every edition receives the signature of a custodian verifying its conformity to the standard copy kept by him or her.<sup>7</sup> Not that the book is not susceptible to change by the trial use and ratification of various edits: rather, such trial use occurs for a predetermined amount of time during which evaluation either does or does not ratify it. In order for changes to be ratified, the mind of two triennial General Conventions must agree to it. By building a certain amount of resistance into the process of revising the BCP, the church has recognized the BCP as constitutive of its own ecclesial identity and essential for its stability as a recognizable community. More than anything else, Anglicans envision themselves as Prayer Book people. This fact has a great deal to say concerning the proper shape of knowledge of God as the church has received it.

Although in principle all Christians acknowledge the Scriptures to be the proper locus and treasury of the church’s received knowledge of God, the influence of the so-called discovery of hermeneutics on the knowledge of the church has been profound, and its effects—for better and worse—are not yet fully known. Philip Turner also observes this, arguing that intrinsic to Anglicanism is an awareness of the reader’s role in reading and hence a fitting way to deal with it.<sup>8</sup> That is, in the Prayer Book tradition, Anglicans have historically had recourse to a hermeneutical conditioning whose commitments are both explicit and unabashedly primary. Written within the pages of the Prayer Book is a self-conscious admission that the Scriptures do not interpret themselves, that in fact all interpretation involves the network of practices and relationships within which interpretation

---

<sup>7</sup> Canon II.3.5. See the “Certificate” on the opposite side of every BCP’s title page.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Turner and Ephraim Radner, *The Fate of Communion: The Agony of Anglicanism and the Future of a Global Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 182.

makes sense in the first place.<sup>9</sup> Readers have an active and not merely receptive role to play in the tradition of divine knowledge. The Prayer Book, then, attempts to embed readers in a whole way of life that, while it does arise *from* an interpretation of Scripture, nevertheless attempts in turn to understand the scriptural text by performance of that way of life. Turner argues on the basis of the Prayer Book that the Anglican Church's knowledge of God

does not appear in the form of a confession like that of Augsburg or Westminster. Neither does it appear in a conciliar document like that of Trent or Vatican II. Rather, the doctrinal content Anglicans share is imbedded primarily in liturgical practices the purpose of which is to form the character of a communion of believers. Its liturgical and formational setting means that the doctrinal content of Anglicanism is, as it were, scattered through a complex of practices rather than focused in a specifically theological document.<sup>10</sup>

The Prayer Book, then, dialectically preserves Scripture as both the indefectible treasury of divine revelation and a text liable to misuse and easy to misinterpret. The BCP preserves a *minimum depositum* of what the church holds already to be true, and any interpretation of Scripture must display continuity with the truth Anglicanism lives in its practice of daily prayer, Scripture reading, and reaffirmation of the baptismal creed. Admittedly, however, this continuity is quite difficult to discern. Here, as with ministerial discernment, few certainties are on offer. While it is true that the Prayer Book tradition does preserve a broadly systematic configuration of doctrines—"the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, Christ's atoning sacrifice, the resurrection of the dead, the life everlasting, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church, the inspiration and primary authority of Holy Scripture, the effective character of the dominical sacraments, and the second Advent of Christ"<sup>11</sup>—and while it is true that Anglican doctrinal minimalism can be and sometimes is made too much of, Anglicanism nevertheless preserves these doctrines not only as conceptual grammar but also

---

<sup>9</sup> For the "social imaginary" as an analogy here, see Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004). See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Turner and Radner, *The Fate of Communion*, 124–125.

<sup>11</sup> Turner and Radner, *The Fate of Communion*, 125.



as guides for a life of worship. This means, perhaps frighteningly to some, that the “dialogue” with Scripture and tradition that many in the Episcopal Church adduce as a basis for radical changes in polity is in fact consistent with the internal logic of Anglican faith. That is to say that the BCP does not envision further systematic enunciation to be necessary. Instead, it relies on the practice of daily prayer and reading of Scripture to form people who perceive the ongoing revelation of God’s will in fitting alignment with the received knowledge of God, in which they daily immerse themselves.

It is the case therefore that Anglicanism vests its ongoing theological faithfulness not in the supposed stability of a given confession or infallible magisterium, but in the continued discernment of its ministers, ordained and lay, as they attempt to hear the voice of the Lord together in Scripture and respond with lives of common prayer. The BCP’s vision of communities listening together for the Lord is reflected in the imperative to many layers of combined judgment on behalf of ordination candidates. For Anglicans it is not the *sensus* but the *consensus fidelium*, continuing in the apostles’ teaching, the breaking of bread, and the prayers, to which the church looks to receive its dogma. It is by this pneumatic common sense that the church presses the Word of God into the transitory life of different times and spaces.

### *I (c). The Mind of Christ in Anglican Knowledge*

It follows from all of the above that those who discern the ministry calling of any given candidate are themselves people whose fitness to hear the Lord’s mind must derive precisely from their formation in the continuous prayerful reception of Scripture. This implication is made explicit in the repeated insistence of C&C that those who are fit for committees and responsibility in the church are members “in good standing,” that is, those who are established in the life of the church and the discipleship process the C&C and BCP envision. At a minimum, it would refer to those who attend worship at least every Sunday (I.1), are baptized and active in the ministry of the baptized in their various ways (III.1), and are living lives recognizable as lives of holiness. The community’s constant reception of Scripture trains the ear for the voice of God, and forms the perception of those whose obligation it is to evaluate the “fitness” (III.6.1) of any given candidate. The Episcopal Church, by adopting the Prayer Book as one of its constitutive documents, and by establishing a discernment process

dependent itself on lives shaped by the prayer life of the church, has acceded to a given understanding of how the mind of the Lord comes to be known: namely, that common prayer and Scripture reading allow development of a common sense of the “fitness” for reception of any novel interpretation of Scripture or formulation of doctrine.

To be sure, it must be granted that developments of doctrine or novel interpretations of Scripture are quite different from the evaluation of a candidate’s fitness for ministry. Yet if it is correct to argue that ordination is not merely a screening process but a complex event in which the church comes to confirm that a particular person is chosen by God for ministry, then insofar as these are both processes in which the church discerns something it did not previously know, the discernment of novel doctrines or readings of Scripture is likewise dependent on the community’s evaluation of their fitness for the church. Just as the BCP requires bishop, people, and candidate all to declare their recognition that a candidate is called, some such recognition will need to occur if the church is to revise its doctrine or worship. It is helpful here to recall that two triennial General Conventions must agree to any change in the Prayer Book. Whether that is a sufficient gathering to decide on such things will be addressed later. For now, it is enough to note that the Episcopal Church makes the change of the BCP conditional on just such an agreement as the canons stipulate in the case of candidates for ordination.

Thus, “fitness,” whether of ordination candidates or the doctrine of the church, is most adequately taken to denote a proper correspondence with the teaching of the church as embodied in the Prayer Book tradition and the Scripture that tradition aims to interpret. And, importantly, that fitness cannot be evaluated in advance. The Prayer Book does not deliver an incorruptible truth but a way of training the church’s ears to hear the Lord. This deliverance of course presupposes the truth of the “doctrinally minimalist” stipulations mentioned above as boundary markers for Anglican faith. Within those boundary markers, however, an incredibly flexible doctrinal life emerges, and the church is compelled to lean hard on the abilities of all its members to know the mind of the Lord.

Anglican discernment therefore entails a cautious hospitality to novelty, a simultaneous awareness of the necessity for development through changing times and seasons and of the potential for deceit this necessity forces upon the church. The canons instruct Commissions on Ministry and bishops to tailor ordination processes to particular times and places. Yet they also seek discernment from members

of the church whose involvement with that specific context is variable (diocesan Standing Committees, for example, might not consist of people intimately familiar with the particular congregation that has begun discernment in a given candidate's case). Context is important but not determinative. Rather, the church expects that certain marks of a call will reveal themselves in a recognizable way to those who have been prepared and trained to see them. The church then is committed to an ordination process that is simultaneously differentiated across space and time and is yet recognizably one process. Through that process, the church renders its judgment on the vocation of an individual candidate, and it trusts by the warrant of Scripture and apostolic tradition that, in doing so, it apprehends the mind of the Lord. This commitment to unity in difference, in which neither is noticeably prior to the other, is Anglicanism's contribution to the wider church: an epistemology of theology that accords with the Reality that theology knows, namely, the Triune God.

## II

Section I offered a theoretical account of how the Episcopal Church thinks it can know the mind of Christ, using its canonical stipulations for discernment of vocations to ordained ministry. It arrived at a theological epistemology whose shape corresponds broadly to the shape of the God whose mind the church aims to know. That correspondence suggests the account is not far off the mark, but it might be questioned whether the church's actual discernment runs along these lines. On issues that are divisive in the church, for example, how has the church discerned the mind of the Lord? Alternatively, if the church is not yet certain of the will of God, how has it responded? To that I now turn.

### *II (a). The Facts of the Case*

It would be impossible to give a full and fair account of the events leading up to and surrounding the consecration of then-Canon Gene Robinson as bishop coadjutor for New Hampshire. For one thing, nearly two decades' worth of arguments before and since the consecration, reports to General Convention, resolutions, ordinations, and blessings would have to be accounted for; for another, every single one of those has generated a secondary literature. One might consult, for example, the report of the Standing Commission on Human Affairs

and Health to the 1979 General Convention and the resultant voluminous discussion that has followed its wake. From that time, some report or other that bore on the question of homosexual inclusion in various aspects of the life of the church was given to every General Convention but one (1985). Of the Conventions that occurred before 2003, it would be a clear strain on credibility to assume that they did not all have some part to play in the church's thinking. Briefly, however, on August 5, 2003, the House of Deputies and House of Bishops concurred on Resolution 2003-C045, which gave the consent of the 2003 General Convention to the consecration of Gene Robinson as bishop coadjutor of the Diocese of New Hampshire. From this account, two questions especially arise that may be fruitful for our examination. First, what is the role of "consent" as required by Title III for all ordinations? Arguments that took place on the floor of the House of Bishops seem to have centered around this very notion, with those in favor of consent arguing that the House of Bishops' role was merely to judge that the proper ordination procedures as set forth in Title III of the Constitution and Canons had been followed.<sup>12</sup> The minority report to the resolution argued instead that consent represented a more positive judgment concerning the candidate's fitness for ministry according to the information currently available. Indeed, the nature of consent entailed that "approval of a bishop in said lifestyle would become a pretext upon which the church would de facto resolve the question of homosexual behavior without due reordering of the church's teaching."

Second, the minority report also contains the opinion that the ordination would strain "relationships within the Anglican Communion." That strain of relationship was apparent in the Lambeth Commission on Communion's 2004 *Windsor Report*, which resolved that

---

<sup>12</sup> I have not been able to discover direct argument on this score. Rather, I have relied on testimony of some who were present for the discussion, a statement to that effect in a prior email to me by Bishop William Gregg, and apparent confirmation of that testimony by the minority report on the House of Bishops floor (found at [http://episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts\\_resolution-complete.pl?resolution=2003-C045](http://episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution-complete.pl?resolution=2003-C045)). The minority report states that the consent to be given is "more than merely a verification of correct procedure, but is equally concerned with the appropriateness of the candidate's wholesomeness of life (and consequently includes sexual behavior)." That the drafters of the minority report felt compelled to witness to the nature of consent in their report seems to imply agreement with Bishop Gregg's statement that this was the grounds on which at least some of the consenting bishops gave consent.

“the Episcopal Church (USA) be invited to effect a moratorium on the election and consent to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate who is living in a same gender union until some new consensus in the Anglican Communion emerges.”<sup>13</sup> *The Windsor Report’s* call was answered by the 75th General Convention (2006), which resolved to “engage in a process of healing and reconciliation” by calling on the church for the exercise of “restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion” (Resolution 2006-B033). In 2009, that restraint was lifted by Resolution 2009-D025, amounting to the church’s retrospective ratification of its decision in Gene Robinson’s case<sup>14</sup> and opening the door for more such cases. This is evident above all in the amendments to the resolution. Specifically, in the sixth clause, the statement concerning the call of God on practicing homosexual persons who live in monogamous, committed relationships was amended to state that “God has called” them in the past. Bishop Robinson’s consecration is of course not the only one in view in the resolution, but the circumstance of this resolution’s passing, in response to commitments made by the 75th General Convention, make clear that Resolution 2003-C045 is firmly in view here and is being confirmed. It was no surprise, therefore (in light of 2009-D025’s confirmation of past actions), when the House of Bishops consented in 2010 to the election of Mary Glasspool, an openly partnered homosexual woman, to the post of suffragan bishop in the Diocese of Los Angeles. The effect of these decisions on the Communion presses an urgent question: how are the discernment processes of the Episcopal Church in these matters related to those of the wider Communion?

### *II (b). Dissent Over Consent*

First, what, then, is the meaning of consent? The “thick” account of the dissenting bishops that consent is more than the recognition of procedural propriety illuminates a particularly significant point. It happens that both in canons and in the BCP there is a prominent role ascribed to the concept of consent, which may clarify what is at stake in at least some of the bishops’ thinner views. First, the consent

<sup>13</sup> Lambeth Commission on Communion, *The Windsor Report* (2004), §134.

<sup>14</sup> See the full legislative history of Resolution 2009-D025 at [http://episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts\\_resolution-complete.pl?resolution=2009-D025](http://episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution-complete.pl?resolution=2009-D025).

that is required of the General Convention to ratify the election of a bishop is just the last in a series of such accords, preceded by the consent required at several levels to be ordained deacon or priest. Admittedly, *one* of the functions of the Standing Committee given in Canons III.6.6 (c) and III.8.7 (c) is to certify that canonical requirements have been made. The sentence in both iterations, however, continues “that there is no sufficient objection on medical, psychological, moral, or spiritual grounds and that they recommend ordination,” in the event that a majority of the members consent. Canonical “requirements,” here at least, are a necessary condition of consent but not a sufficient one.

Additionally, it would not seem that a majority vote is necessary to determine whether a candidate passed her GOE’s, submitted her seminary paperwork, or finished Title IV training. It is hard to imagine the possibility of conflict over whether those things have happened. The question of sufficient objection, however, on moral grounds, or indeed even of the visibility of an actual vocation, is exactly the kind of matter that a committee of people would be necessary to discern, and about which they might be expected to disagree at times. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Preface of the BCP affirms freedom in Christ to a radical degree in that anything that “cannot be clearly determined to belong to Doctrine must be referred to Discipline; and therefore, by common consent and authority, may be altered, abridged, enlarged, amended, or otherwise disposed of.”<sup>15</sup> Consent is related to authority as part of the epistemic mode by which the church develops its worship and practice. The Prayer Book changes by “consent.” And the fact that C&C requires, consent notwithstanding, for two successive conventions to ratify BCP changes implies that “consent” is simply the affirmative answer in the church’s complex discernment processes, whatever they be. It is for this reason that a thick description of discernment was offered in Section I, for if consent is the answer in the affirmative at the end of that process, then it follows that consent is meant to be the Spirit-led moment of recognition whereby the church recognizes as God’s will that which was previously unknown to be so.

And because consent is part of the church’s acquisition of knowledge of God, the canons demand that those consenting be themselves formed and forged in repeated community reception of Scripture,

---

<sup>15</sup> 1979 BCP, 9.

common prayer, and worship together. That is, they ought to be possessed of a social imaginary deeply conditioned by the complex extension in time and space of the received Word of God. The nature of consent as conceived by the canons and BCP, then, implies a further question: that of the relation of the Episcopal Church to all those with whom it joins in common prayer and in the Prayer Book tradition—that is, to the Communion.

### *II (c). Communion and Consensus*

*The Windsor Report*, while recognizing “the historic autonomy enshrined in Anglican provinces,”<sup>16</sup> nevertheless emphasizes the Communion’s ties in the ligaments of “mutual affection.”<sup>17</sup> In the wake of Bishop Robinson’s ordination, and in the wake of the Communion’s response in the *Windsor Report*, several Episcopal voices have attempted to minimize the relation of the Episcopal Church to the Anglican Communion by pointing to that very phrase. But they have done so without realizing the degree to which the Episcopal Church’s own canons utilize the vocabulary of mutual affection (*consentire*) to understand the process by which the Episcopal Church discerns what it does not know. And Prayer Book practice, which guides that discernment, being the common legacy of all Anglicans, commits Anglicans to discernment of God together.

So how is the Communion to be negotiated in matters of disagreement or doubt? *The Windsor Report* affirms autonomy of the provinces, but it also holds them together. How then are autonomy and mutual obligation to be held together? A certain school of thought within the Episcopal Church has emphasized that the resolutions of Lambeth, as contained in reports like *Windsor*, are entirely voluntary and non-binding. But the Constitution and Canons are binding, and they reveal a process of coming to know the mind of the Lord that leans on the discernment of the whole church for decisions that affect the whole church. As was noted above, voices in the process speak at different volumes, and similarly it is not to be expected that every voice in the Communion will have equal weight in what any province decides to do. Moreover, it is unlikely to be discernible in advance which voices will speak with most authority in any given question.

---

<sup>16</sup> Robin Eames, Foreword to *The Windsor Report*.

<sup>17</sup> *The Windsor Report*, §45.

The contextual and local do privilege different voices in different ways, and there is simply no formal way to secure knowledge in a permanently stable method. Foundationalisms, be they Catholic and Protestant, are notoriously corruptible, and the Anglican alternative is aimed precisely at negotiating doubt in a way that opens up space for the Holy Spirit to work in unpredictable ways.

In the absence of the methodological certainty of deductive reasoning from sure foundations, then, what gives the discernment process integrity? How can the discernment procedures adapted to each local congregation, and hence not uniform, still yield a reliable assessment of the candidate's fittingness for ordination? The bonds of Anglican consensus, of mutual affection (and submission) are the only integrity furnished to Anglican thought. Thus, the necessity for community that is canonically stipulated in the case of ordination has its analogue in the conciliar imperative of Communion life. The fact that Bishop Robinson's ordination implied a reevaluation of received catholic doctrine from the time of the apostles (doctrines in some form or another that the apostles are *known to have taught themselves*) relativizes the otherwise-existent primacy of the local and contextual. On the one hand, therefore, the relationship of province to Communion is (and must be) perfectly dynamic. On the other, however, this dynamism should not in the least entail a relativistic approach to Communion, as if the commendations of the wider Anglican Church were merely "suggestions" or "advice." Rather, it is simply the nature of certain issues to be liable to greater Communion input, such that the Communion might be justified in telling a province that its own claims to contextual primacy must for the moment be put aside. Indeed, if the Standing Committee (not necessarily local) does not consent to the candidate's ordination, the affirmation of the candidate's sponsoring congregation and rector do not trump. Consensus, then, is not static. The church's self-yielding and differentiation need not exist in zero-sum relation. Instead, like the Trinitarian relation from which Anglican discernment derives its coherence, the provincial and communal run together in sympathetic concourse. The province is most a province when its freedom allows a politic of kenosis; the Communion is most a Communion when it frees the province to discern the mind of Christ as best it can. And it is precisely this receipt of self as given that the canons enforce for ordination—precisely the same receipt the church would forego if it failed to risk its rights and prerogatives in costly self-gift.



## III

Let it be assumed for the moment, the catholic tradition notwithstanding, that differences of the scriptural context from the modern one are sufficient to warrant revision of the church's view on sexuality, and that practicing monogamous homosexuals are not for that reason to be prevented from ordination. Given that, how might the church come to know it in a faithful way? What are the consequences of failing to hear the voice of the Lord? How do failures in discernment affect the church, located as it is in time and space? In what follows, I will draw some preliminary conclusions about Anglican discernment and point out what I take to be the significant failure in the case of Gene Robinson.

*III (a). Communion, Discernment, and the Price of a Shortcut*

The overwhelming consensus of the Communion at this point in time is that practiced homosexuality is not yet to be countenanced. Assuming that God's will for the church is that it revise this consensus, the Episcopal Church finds itself in possession of knowledge that it is extremely unlikely even to know as true knowledge at this point. The Episcopal Church's Prayer Book and the structures of its own canonical discernment place an extraordinary weight against its own account of its knowledge. As it happens, *The Windsor Report* envisions precisely this circumstance. It gives the Episcopal Church the benefit of the doubt and invites it to wait for consensus to emerge, a consensus whose emergence depends on the continued practice of common prayer, Scripture reading, and involvement for the present in a common rule of life. The logic is kenotic in the mode of St. Paul; for if the Son of God is discovered laying aside prerogatives to which he is far more entitled than the Episcopal Church is to anything it thinks it knows (Phil. 2:5–8), then the church can abide in a form of life that it assumes for the sake of the rest of the body of Christ. In this way, it lives its need for the other members by the *practice* of agreement in advance of the fact of such agreement. And it proclaims by such practice its faith in the Lord who, Paul exhorts the Philippians, "will make clear" (Phil. 3:15) whatever remains to be made clear, precisely through the "waiting for one another" that Paul envisions for his churches (1 Cor. 11:33). This conceptual indebtedness of Anglican polity to the Apostle Paul is not unrecognized by participants in these events. His influence

is apparent in repeated references to him by those who were party to the church's struggles over these events. Thus, for example, Frank Griswold, in a pastoral letter written in advance of the 2003 General Convention, cites 1 Corinthians 12:21, in which Paul exclaims that parts of the body cannot say to one another "I have no need of you."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Archbishop Rowan Williams structured his entire response to the Communion's troubles in these times from what he took to be the logic of Paul's command that the Corinthians practice "waiting for each other."<sup>19</sup>

And if God will make clear what is lacking through the church's persistence in the form of life that enables communion, it follows that rupture in that communion is an epistemological liability. Section I argued that the Episcopal Church is right to recognize how limitations upon human knowers compel them to common discernment. In the case of knowledge that will revise the received teaching of the community through time and space, those limitations are pronounced. And in the case of the community's fracture, there is good reason to doubt whether that knowledge can even be recovered. Division, that is, hypostatizes the church's ignorance of God.

It is not therefore a benignly private affair that the Episcopal Church, on the grounds that its context demanded it,<sup>20</sup> began ordaining homosexual clergy in the 1970s. In spite of repeated pleadings from the wider Communion that churches discerning divisive issues should wait for greater consensus,<sup>21</sup> it consecrated a practicing homosexual as bishop in 2003. It funded that decision with a stripped down account of its own discernment processes that allowed it to posit strict

---

<sup>18</sup> See the letter's full text at [http://episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/ENS/ENSpress\\_release.pl?pr\\_number=2003-160-A](http://episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/ENS/ENSpress_release.pl?pr_number=2003-160-A).

<sup>19</sup> See Anglican Communion News Service, "Archbishop of Canterbury—'Challenge and Hope' for the Anglican Communion," June 27, 2006; <http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2006/06/archbishop-of-canterbury-challenge-and-hope-for-the-anglican-communion.aspx>.

<sup>20</sup> For an instance of this common argument, see the 1997 report to Convention of the Standing Liturgical Commission, [http://www.episcopalarchives.org/e-archives/blue\\_book/reports/1997/bb\\_1997-R021.pdf](http://www.episcopalarchives.org/e-archives/blue_book/reports/1997/bb_1997-R021.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> See one of many such statements in the Anglican Consultative Council's *Virginia Report: The Report of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission* (1997); <http://www.lambethconference.org/1998/documents/report-1.pdf>: "It is not a matter of weakness that the Church is unable to make instant decisions in relation to the complex matters of faith, order and morals which come before it, but the way it lives in the process of discernment, decision making and reception may give profound witness and provide a model for other communities" (5.26).

obedience to the letter of its canons, but only at the cost of withdrawal of any robust sense of its engagement with the mind of God. This is a judgment based not on the pure fact of Bishop Robinson's consecration; for until the Prayer Book is more specific regarding human sexuality, interpretations of Scripture that emphasize disanalogy between Scripture's context and the modern world are at least in principle admissible. This freedom of interpretation is the logical entailment of the epistemology enshrined in the canons and Prayer Book. But it is also the case that such interpretations, until they are received communally, must count as at-best enlightened or even prophetic private discernment.

Bishop Robinson's ordination, then, was controversial because it implied the reception not only of a man into the House of Bishops but the reversal of certain doctrines the church had held in some fashion until then. There are those who argue that his ordination was merely a local, procedural matter. It would follow, were they right, that discernment over ordination and discernment over larger matters are simply disanalogous. Of course, the *implications* of Bishop Robinson's ordination are exactly what make his case theologically fruitful for reflecting on discernment in the first place. Since his ordination displays Title III in use, it shows the fitness of Title III as a tool for discerning the kinds of theological innovations that were implied in this ordination.

The fact that the minority report's objections, on the question of consent, agree with the reactions of the Communion as expressed in the *Windsor Report* (not to mention numerous other communiqués) is theologically significant. It is impossible to evaluate a candidate's "fitness" for ministry without reflecting normatively on the teaching of the church. That there was a minority report objecting *on canonical grounds of such fitness* to an ordination that would redefine the church's teaching shows exactly the interplay and analogy being proposed here. Thus, every act of discernment to ordination is *itself* a fresh reception of the teachings of the church. Of course many ordinations do not entail any significant revision in doctrine and can therefore be dealt with subsidiarily. But Bishop Robinson's ordination clearly did imply such revision. So the simultaneous evasion of Title III combined with what Ephraim Radner calls the "evasion of communion"<sup>22</sup> concerning the theological implications of this ordina-

---

<sup>22</sup> Turner and Radner, *The Fate of Communion*, 220.

tion show that no charge of disanalogy can stand. Indeed, Robinson's case shows instead the analogical fitness of discernment for ministry as a model for receiving or rejecting new doctrines.

Of course, any such discernment can be corrupted, by the evasion of communal discernment in favor of just such prophetic private discernment as the Episcopal Church, in the best-case scenario, can be said to have. As Paul reminds the Corinthians, the possession of a prophetic word does not legitimate the disruption of the whole community's striving together after the mind of Christ. He is quick to hold prophets accountable to speak in turn, and to give the whole church time to "weigh what is said" (1 Cor. 14:29). But all action based on that private discernment must check itself at the boundary of the other in the paradoxical logic of communal love, for there is no shortcut to the mind of Christ. This is not the assertion of some overblown and imposing authority but the necessary consequence of the Pauline pneumatic epistemology in which the fullness of knowledge is *at the same time* the fullness of love (1 Cor. 13). Just this epistemology is what I take to be operative in Title III, where the sense of a candidate's call transforms from being a matter of private discernment to a matter of public knowledge, via the working together of the whole body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:14–26).

### III (b). A Solemn Reassembly

Thus, it is not in principle impossible that the will of God for Anglicanism is full inclusion of practicing homosexuals. But the Anglican Communion in its current state is quite likely unable even to discover such inclusion to be God's will even if it *were* true. The Communion exists in a state of radical fracture, and this has real and palpable consequences for the possible things that can be known and claimed about God. The self-confident assurance with which many Episcopalians claim to know that God's agenda in our time is radical inclusion does nothing to dislodge the judgment of God under which a whole divided church subsists.<sup>23</sup> The counterclaims of those who in a divided church oppose such revisions, although themselves *similarly relativized* by the fact of division to which they have in their measure

---

<sup>23</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), esp. chaps. 6 and 7. On divine judgment of a divided church, see Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998).

contributed, nevertheless have the weight of catholicity behind them. And the catholicity of the apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread, and the prayers must be the beginning point for any constructive re-engagement with the divisive questions of our time. In any event, it must be seen that division of the church is an *epistemological* danger: division in the Lord's body is also, and necessarily, division in that body's mind.

At this point, an obvious question might arise concerning the shape of any alternative course of action. As a thought experiment, one might imagine a situation in which the Episcopal Church's clergy and lay leaders, theologians, and biblical scholars discern in their common prayerful reception of Scripture that God wills for full homosexual inclusion into their church's life at every level. Such discernment, if true, would mean that the Episcopal Church has information the rest of the church does not yet have. They might then advocate for that vision at Lambeth, at primates' meetings, and in reports and publications, speaking as loudly as they wished whenever there was any chance to do so. They would hold the word of the Lord as they see it firmly in the view of the whole Communion. They would embrace the doubt that is endemic to knowledge of God in advance of the *eschaton*, while compelling their brothers and sisters to the same faithful doubt about their own views. In the meantime, they would submit to the will of the Communion as expressed in its various instruments, all the while formulating meaningful pastoral responses to the situation on the ground in their own contexts. They would commit to reading and receiving the Scriptures prayerfully both with the Global South primates and with various gay advocacy groups. They would mourn and pray for the recalcitrance of the Communion they nevertheless hold to in fellowship, hoping for change and living in solidarity with those whom they feel to be rejected by the church's blindness.

Eventually, if this were God's will problems would necessarily arise in the rest of the Communion, either from external pressures or from internal pressures toward coherence put to the Communion by the Episcopal Church's loyal opposition. Those pressures would expose the lack in the Communion's knowledge of God and compel deeper conversation and prayerful gathering around the Scriptures. The Episcopal Church's voice would then be in a position to speak clearly to situations in which the Communion's blindness was limiting their ability to negotiate complexities of their reality. In this light, the Episcopal Church's perspective might come increasingly to be

received, thanks to its ability to handle and respond effectively to the pressures felt by the Communion. Over time, the Global South might begin to hear the voice of the Lord in the Episcopal Church's re-conception of human sexuality. Meanwhile, those who suffer the frustration of ordination and vocation will be found to have participated in the wounds and suffering of the Lord Jesus, whose own ministry was rejected while he was unjustly scourged and afflicted. In their giving up of their own prerogatives for the good of the church, they would themselves come to signify the broken body of Christ. Whichever way the mind of the church settles in the long run, the Spirit will testify of such that they were saints, gifts of God whereby a weak church found the mind of its Lord and was changed by the encounter more perfectly into the divine likeness.

### *Conclusion*

In the end, Anglicanism's gift to the wider church is a means of coming to knowledge of God that corresponds both to the kind of being humans are and to the God in whose image they are made. Thus, Anglicanism is entirely involved in the humanness of the church's earthly life, recognizing that there is no doctrine that is not embedded in the limitations of particular knowers, whom it trains in the ability to form particular judgments about the good. The content of Christianity thereby reveals itself aesthetically, as the fittingness discerned in the form of a beautiful life: the corresponding "fit" of what seems to be the move of the Spirit now to the received testimonies of God's activity in history. The coinherence of doctrine and practice in the church's knowing commits the church to a polity that reckons honestly with the sort of thing human knowledge is. Anglicanism is the experience of God through a social imaginary reworked in light of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. And any account of the legality of this or that canonical action must itself fit not only with the letter of the law but with the ecclesiology that is put "in action" by the canons' existence—the form of the canons, without which their content is not only liable to misinterpretation and abuse, but is bound to it.

The question of canonical legality then, must engage the question of whether any given interpretation of the law coheres with the Anglican total pattern of life. Conversely, if the given interpretation were absolutized into a form of life, would that consequent life be acceptable? It seems to me highly unlikely that the content of the canonical

“consent” could have been so under-freighted if questions like this had been asked. And it is just such questions that must be asked if the church’s canons are to yield anything like a genuine rule of life to its ecclesial body politic. If the canons are not to be merely a parody of the “law” that governs the false peace of the *civitas terrena*, which is itself a parody of the ordered logic of the life of God, then they must not be consulted as statutes are, with all possible readings considered and a *de facto* assumption that somebody has to lose. Instead, they must be treated exactly as a rule of life, interpreted at all times with respect to the form of life they attempt to inculcate, and interpreted by people who themselves are formed by the life they presume: the life of immersion in Scripture, prayerful response, and loving self-gift in the patient preference of another. In this way alone is the mind of the Lord known. And the canons themselves, read in this way, can and do serve to bind lives together in the church’s living speech, as a grammar for living Christianly in the mission of God. They can and do furnish its bringing the nations into the fold of those who know the Lord. They can and do anoint its interpreting by the gift of the Holy Spirit the Anglican prayer language.

