

# Biblical Reasons for Staying in the Episcopal Church

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Many Episcopalians are very concerned about the beliefs and practices of many in leadership in the Episcopal Church, and are wondering whether they should stay in the church. Some have already left. This brief pamphlet is written by one of the concerned, in the hope it will be helpful to others.

On the night before His arrest, Jesus prayed for all His followers, present and future, and among the things He prayed for was their perfect unity. All Christians agree on the importance of that unity, and the unity and fellowship described in the Acts of the Apostles and elsewhere in the New Testament.

What we are not so agreed about is what that unity looks like in practice. Our initial assumption may be that it looks like people all believing the same thing, and all living according to the same moral standards, but as we look more closely at what the New Testament says about this, we will find that it's not so simple.

This booklet will examine the New Testament teaching on the subject, but it's important to understand that there two different questions that arise. The first is the question of how Christian leaders should deal with Christians who believe or behave in un-Christian ways. The second is how Christians should deal with Christian leaders who believe or behave in un-Christian ways.

Those of us in the Episcopal Church who believe that our church's apparent acceptance of sexual relationships between persons of the same sex (whom for convenience I will refer to as the orthodox) are in this second position. We do not have the ability to discipline the unorthodox. Bishops can only be disciplined by a majority of other bishops, and orthodox bishops are in the minority. Clergy can only be disciplined by the bishop, and most unorthodox clergy have an unorthodox bishop. Lay persons can only be disciplined by their parish clergy, most of whom are unorthodox. As long as we are in the minority, we have no power to do whatever scripture says should be done in this situation. The question for us is not how leaders should deal with the unorthodox, but how we orthodox should respond to unorthodox leaders.

The following discussion refers, I hope, to all the New Testament verses that deal with this subject. I will go through them in the order in which they occur in the New Testament, and indicate which are general principles that apply to the whole issue, which apply when the orthodox are in authority, and which apply to our own situation, in which the orthodox are not in authority.

To begin at the beginning, notice that Jesus envisages baptism as the *beginning* of the process of teaching people what Christianity means. When He sends the disciples out on the Great Commission (Matthew 28.16-20), He says *first* baptize, and *second* teach them all that Jesus has taught us. If the unity that Christ prayed for is to include all the baptized, it will necessarily include some persons who fall short of the standard which they are eventually expected to attain. People who have not yet been successfully taught 'all that I have commanded', regardless of their

age, must still be assumed to be members of the church. This will be agreed by almost all who practice infant baptism; the question that faces the Anglican Communion today is what the mature Christian is to do when those in leadership in the church are still ‘babes in Christ’, not yet committed to ‘all that I have commanded’.

The first passages we come across in the New Testament express some important general principles that apply whether the orthodox are in authority or not. Going through Matthew’s gospel, we come across the following:

Jesus’s words concerning those who call Him ‘Lord, Lord’ without doing His will in Matthew 7.21–23 suggest that such persons will not be cast out of the church until the final judgement—‘on that day’. He makes the same point even more forcefully in Matthew 24.11–14, 24, 31. A famous verse in Revelation, 18.4, actually describes this happening on the day of judgement.

Jesus’s command in Matthew 10.14 to ‘shake the dust off your feet’ is a sign for those who reject His message entirely, ie who won’t even begin the process of discipleship, and is therefore not applicable to this situation.

The parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13 suggests that even in the church, the weeds and tares grow together until the last judgement. Some argue that Jesus’s explanation of the parable of the sower, immediately preceding the parable of the wheat and the tares, in which he says that ‘the field is the world’, applies also to this parable, but if that were true, the only point of the parable would seem to be that Christians in the world must not exterminate non-Christians in the world. Good and bad in the church seems the likelier application, and has been accepted as such by Augustine and most of the ‘fathers’ of the church.

Matthew 15.13 says that it’s God, not man, who is to root up the plants He has not planted—‘Let them alone’, is the conclusion.

Matthew 18.17 is Jesus’s commandment in cases where Christians sin *against one another* and cannot legitimately be applied to Christians concerned about fellow-Christians who sin against God. Where it does apply, the remedy is ‘let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector’. In other words, have as little to do with such a person as possible; Gentiles and tax-collectors could not be avoided altogether, but they could be and were avoided as far as close fellowship was concerned.

This passage is immediately followed by the words, ‘whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven etc’; if this refers to the advice about breaking fellowship (a subject which will become clearer in some later passages) immediately preceding it, we must be very careful indeed not to do so without absolute certainty that we are doing the right thing.

The passages parallel to these in Mark and Luke make the same points, as one would expect, and there does not seem to be anything on this subject in Mark and Luke that’s not also in Matthew.

Moving on to John, then, the image of pruning the vine in John 15 is also one that refers to the end times, when the pruned branches will be

thrown into the fire and burned; in any case, it is God who is the vine-dresser and does the pruning, and there is no suggestion here that this work is delegated to the church.

In Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira are two of the baptised who lie to the church and its leadership. Peter’s response is to confront them with the lie. No further act was necessary or, in this case, because of God’s own intervention, possible.

In Acts 8, Simon Magus is a baptised man who thinks that the Holy Spirit is for sale. Peter calls on him to repent, because he has no part in salvation while his heart is capable of such misunderstanding. It’s not clear whether Simon repents or not, although most commentators assume he does not. In either case, there is no record of any further action.

In Acts 15, we find the first description of what orthodox Christian leaders should do others are teaching falsehood, and the next several passages apply to this situation. Here in Acts 15 is a description of a group called ‘Judaizers’, Christians (they are described as ‘believers’ in v 5) who begin to teach that Gentiles must become Jews in order to become Christians. The church considers this at some length, and eventually decides this is false teaching. The true teaching is widely published, but no action is reported as being taken against those who had upheld the false teaching. In 21.17ff, we can see that the false teaching may not only still be flourishing in the church, but dominant in it; James warns Paul that Jewish believers are ‘all zealous for the law’.

In Acts 20, Paul is speaking to the Ephesian elders. First, note that in vv 26f, Paul expresses no confidence that all the elders are up to the standard required, only that if they’re not, it’s not Paul’s fault, because he’s done the teaching required of him. He then urges them to be careful, because some of them, or some they will later admit to their number, will certainly end up teaching falsely. No action is recommended against them, only care not to become one of them.

Romans 12.19 reminds Christians to leave punishment to God and overcome evil with good, a point which will be made again. In 13.13, Paul reminds the Christians of Rome that sexual immorality is not acceptable, but does not suggest any sanction against those who need this teaching. In 14.1 they are to welcome the weak in faith, but not to quarrel with them, and 15.1 reminds them to bear with the failings of the weak. Finally, in 16.17, when people are wrongly adding to Christ’s teaching, fellowship is broken with them to the extent that they are to be *avoided* (ἐκκλίετε ἀπ’ αὐτῶν).

In I Corinthians 5, a Christian is having sexual relations with his father’s wife. This does not appear to have been anything the Corinthian Christians had thought was wrong until Paul rebuked them for it. Leviticus 18.8 and 20.11 condemn the practice. Paul sets the Corinthians straight, and says a lot more about how fellowship with the sinning person is broken. In v 2 calls on them to mourn to such an extent that the offender is removed from among them (ἀρθῆι ἐκ μέσου ὑμῶν). The

link between the mourning and the removal, 'mourn *so that* he will be removed', is absent from most translations, but explicit in the original (ὥστε, which means 'so that'), and this link is crucial in deciding exactly what 'being removed' means. 'Shamed into staying away', perhaps? Verse 11 explains it as 'not associating with (μὴ συναναμίγνυσθαι)... not even eating with' the offender. But it is a formal act, made when the congregation is together, v. 5, and is serious enough to merit the phrase 'deliver him to Satan', although this may simply be a way of talking about those who are outside the body of Christ. If this was done at the Sunday service—imagine the rector leading a prayer that a named person in the congregation will repent of his immorality—it's easy to see how 'shamed into staying away' would have worked. Note that the offender is still referred to as a 'brother', however.

In I Corinthians 6, and again in 10.8, the congregation as a whole has to be reminded that consorting with prostitutes is not appropriate for Christians. No sanction is suggested, simply encouragement not to do it.

II Corinthians 2.5ff is generally assumed to be an appeal to the Corinthians to forgive the person involved in the I Corinthians 5 incident. There is no mention of the person's repentance, by the way; perhaps the man had by this time married his father's young widow, so repentance, which might imply putting her away, was not (or no longer) looked for.

II Corinthians 6.14–7.2, 'do not be mismatched with unbelievers', is accepted by most biblical scholars as referring to avowed, practising pagans, as implied in v 16, and similarly used in I Corinthians 7.14 and 15, and 14.24.

In II Corinthians 11, Paul expresses his sorrow that the Corinthians so easily chase after false teaching. No sanction is applied to get them to return to the truth, just persuasion (applied within a good personal relationship). In 12.21 he is worried that the Corinthian Christians have not listened to him, and have not given up or repented of their sexual immorality, and that he will therefore have to 'mourn over them' when he comes to Corinth again—presumably also at a Sunday service with the same goal in mind as in I Corinthians 5. The same word 'mourn' is used in both cases.

In Galatians 1, we see that the Judaizers have been busy in the Galatian church, and have been treated as brothers by Peter. Paul says in 1.8f that they are to be 'accursed', considered under the curse of God. A fuller explanation of the curse he has in mind is found in 3.10ff—Judaizers stay under the curse that is on all who break the law, Deuteronomy 27.26, and for which the Old Testament sacrifices were prescribed. No sanction is suggested, even though their paltering with the truth could endanger their salvation (5.21), Paul just entreats them to come back to the truth (4.12). The Galatians are to restore (καταρτίζετε) those who transgress in a spirit of gentleness (6.1), remembering that they too are tempted. This is the context for the phrase 'bear one another's burdens', by the way: it is the burden of temptation that we are to help each other bear.

Ephesians 4.11ff suggests that the teaching ministry is given to the church for the purpose of bringing everyone up to the same degree of maturity *eventually* (cf Colossians 1.28). Sexual immorality is one of the characteristics of the Ephesian church too, 5.3 implies. Paul's readers are 'not to associate with' (μὴ οὖν γίνεσθε συμμετοχοὶ αὐτῷ, 'do not become participants with') those who teach that sexual immorality is not a problem. This is most likely to mean 'don't join in'. No other response is suggested.

The Judaizers are also well established at Philippi (Philippians 3.2), but the only command is to 'look out for' them, and to keep one's eyes on those who are like Paul (3.17).

A species of Judaizing seems to be the dominant note at Colossae; there are lots of Old Testament rules and regulations, plus a sort of angel-worship that may have become popular in the Judaist wing of the church. No sanction is suggested, the Colossians are just told 'don't buy it'.

Sexual immorality is something Paul is concerned about at Thessalonika, too: he writes to remind them that he had been pretty clear about this with them already, and urges them not to forget that, and not to 'wrong a brother' in that way, presumably meaning not to fool with a fellow-parishioner's wife. No sanction is proposed—'the Lord is the avenger in these matters', 4.6, only the most solemn charge (ἐνορκίζω) to read the letter to everyone. In the second letter, chapter 3, the readers are to 'keep away from' (στέλλεσθαι ἀπὸ) those who are idle and those who don't follow Paul's standards. Those in this position are commanded and encouraged to do better. If they don't, the readers are not to associate with them (μὴ συναναμίγνυσθαι αὐτῷ). This is the same phrase as in I Corinthians 5.11, and with the same 'so that' link—so that he may be ashamed. These people, too, remain brothers, and are to be warned, or taught (νουθετεῖτε), as is appropriate with a fellow-Christian.

Paul left Timothy in Ephesus specifically to deal with false teaching (I Timothy 1.3), so both his letters to him are full of relevant material. Timothy is to 'charge' or order (παραγγέλλω) the false teachers to stop. No sanction accompanies this. Two of the false teachers are named, and Paul says he has handed them over to Satan in order to teach them not to blaspheme. It's not at all clear what this means; in I Corinthians 5.5 it seems to refer to a formal act of expulsion, but here it seems more likely to mean that Paul had personally 'written off' the false teachers. If the Alexander who was still in the Ephesian church when Paul wrote to Timothy again is the one referred to here, expulsion must not have been possible in this case. 3.5 and its qualifications for overseers is an important reminder that there were no canons that could be invoked in those days, and that leaders had to have moral authority, for there was no other available. 'Command and teach these things. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example', 4.11f. Timothy is to 'have nothing to do with' (παρατιθέομαι) false teachings, 4.7, and to teach the truth instead (4.6). And to show them where they are wrong (ἐλεγχε),

5.20, which can also mean rebuke them, but the word for that used in 5.1 is ἐπιπλήσσω.

The second letter appears to be caused by Timothy's discouragement that there is still so much false teaching and immorality in the church. He is not to be ashamed of the truth he is charged to teach, and is to continue to avoid the false teaching. He is to patiently endure evil and correct his opponents with gentleness, hoping they will repent, 2.24f. He is to avoid (ἀποτρέπομαι) those who won't listen, 3.5. The whole tenor of this second letter is that faithlessness in the church is to be expected, and he mustn't let it stop him teaching the truth. The image in 2.20ff of the great house with vessels of varying degrees of nobility confirms the picture of a mixed church.

The letter to Titus, who is doing the same work in Crete that Timothy is doing in Ephesus, takes the same line. An overseer must be able to refute those who contradict him, just as in the letter to Timothy. Opponents must be silenced, 1.11, by rebuking them sharply (ἐλέγχε ἀποτόμως). Do it in order that their faith may be sound. He is to exhort and rebuke with authority, 2.15. When someone won't listen, he is to warn him twice, and then have nothing to do with him (παραιτέομαι). He is to acquire moral authority—'exhort and reprove with all authority, let no one disregard you', 2.15.

I Peter exhorts the elders to tend their flock 'not as domineering but being examples', 5.3. II Peter says that heresy and sexual immorality can be expected to be rife in the church; the letter encourages the readers not to follow their examples, but discusses no sanction against the immoral or the heretical.

II Peter 2.4–10 says that God knows how to rescue Christians from false teachers, ie don't be discouraged by their presence and even their success.

John's letters refer to false teachers who had left a church, I John 2.19; the response towards those still in it is 'not to receive them in your home or greet them', II 1.10. In the case of Diotrephes, the only explicit example we have in the New Testament of a false teacher who is in charge of a congregation, the orthodox are to publicly point out (ὀπομιμνήσκω) his error, III 1.10, but there is no suggestion that they should leave his church.

Diotrephes the false teacher, by the way, is the only person in the New Testament described as putting someone out of the church. Likewise in Jude, it is the heretics who pronounce judgement, and the faithful who leave the business of rebuking to the Lord, 1.8ff; it is the heretics who set up divisions (ἀποδιορίζω), the faithful who work at convincing, 1.19ff.

In Revelation, there are false teachers in Ephesus, whom the faithful are commended for 'enduring patiently', 2.3; the faithful are rebuked for allowing their love to grow cold. In Pergamum there are false teachers, and the faithful are called to repentance as a result. In Thyatira, where sexual immorality is an issue, the faithful are rebuked for their 'toleration' or 'forgiveness' (ἀφίημι) of one of its promoters, but are

given no other burden than holding fast to what they have (2.24f). In Revelation 18.4 is the famous verse used by the 16th century Anglican reformers to justify separation from the Roman church and others to justify separation from the Anglican church, but neither can be justified by the context, which is the final judgement. It is at the end of history, as Jesus had said in Matthew's account, that the faithful will be taken out of the mixed church in order that the unfaithful may be punished.

These are all the passages that describe false teaching and immoral living in the New Testament church, and from them we have to deduce the way to deal with such things in today's church. The key to a reasonable interpretation of these things is the meaning to be assigned to the concept of 'avoidance' that is used so often. The words used for this are ἐκκλίnete, 'turn away from', συναναμίγυσθαι, 'mix up together' (as in 'don't'), συμμετοχοι, 'share with', also has the sense 'cast one's lot with', στέλλεσθαι, 'avoid', παραιτέομαι, 'refuse'—the same word that's used to tell Timothy not to enroll younger women among the widows, he's to refuse them; and ἀποτρέπομαι, 'turn away from'. The point that needs to be made is that the basic meaning of all these words is simply 'avoiding'—in the same way that at Diocesan meetings there are certain people that one avoids (for many different reasons: some talk too much, some drink too much, some hold unscriptural views on various subjects). None of these words or phrases require anything more formal than this. None of them can mean 'expel', or 'excommunicate', by the way; the word for that would be ἐκβάλλω, the word used in III John 10 for what Diotrephes is doing to the faithful, and most often translated in the RSV as 'cast out'. This sort of avoidance is also consistent with Jesus's own words in Matt 18.17.

And there were phrases available to these writers if they wished to suggest something more stronger. Ἀρνέομαι, translated 'renounce' in RSV, for instance. Or ἀφίσταμαι, the word used in Acts 22.29 for the examiners who discover that Paul is a Roman citizen and get away quick before they get in trouble. Even ἀποχωρίζομαι, the word used in Acts 15.39 to describe the separation between Barnabas and Paul is stronger than the words used in the passages listed above.

Most of these examples show faithful church leaders dealing with unfaithful church members, or to leaders at a 'lower' level, but in the cases referred to in Acts 20, Acts 21.17, I and II Timothy, Titus, the Johannine letters, Jude, and the three Revelation churches referred to, it is implied that it is those at the highest levels of leadership are unfaithful. The recommended procedure doesn't seem to be any different in either case; it's avoid them, not cast them out, even in the case of the immoral brother in Corinth.

The question of whether this avoidance extends to fellowship in the Lord's Supper is dealt with explicitly in I Corinthians 11, which may cast further light on the case referred to in I Cor 5.11. And the whole thrust of I Corinthians 11 is surely that the Lord's table is *not* the place where divisions are to be recognised. The Corinthian supper was divided, with

each group celebrating its own little communion, and Paul says, don't do that, eat the supper together. Jesus had no problem having table-fellowship with tax-collectors. I Corinthians 5.11 is pretty clear about not eating with brothers who are immoral, however, and it seems stretching it to say that this applies *only* to private meals at home and not to the Lord's Supper. From the point of view of attendance at Communion, the best approach would seem to be to avoid Communion with unrepentant sinners to the extent that it is possible, but not to make a public issue of it. From the point of view of the priest celebrating Communion, the Anglican approach to this is expressed in the Prayer Book's disciplinary rubric—if someone who is *known to the congregation as an unrepentant sinner* attends, he is not to be given Communion. If it's only the priest who knows, he should talk to the person concerned privately, and not make a public issue of it. When the Bishop commands his clergy to receive together, at a clergy gathering, for instance, the commandment to 'obey those who are over you in the Lord' can be seen as the 'overriding authority'. A private request to the bishop not to put his faithful clergy in such a position would be appropriate, but not a refusal to participate. Communion with fellow-Christians or fellow-clergy who are not themselves immoral, but merely tolerant of others who are, would not seem to be a case calling for avoidance.

Finally, there's the question of how to balance the commandment to avoid false teachers with the commandment to refute them. The word translated 'refute' or 'reprove' is the one Jesus uses in the Matthew 18.15 passage, and he clearly expects there to be personal contact—'between you and him alone'. So we are not avoid them to the extent that it makes it impossible to point out their error. The question then is how many times do we do that. The 'once or twice' of Titus, actually 'a first time and a second time' may or may not be strictly literal, it could mean 'a few times', although clearly there's a limit implied; but against that must be set Jesus's command to Peter to forgive his brother seventy times seven times.

How can all this be summed up? The orthodox are to deal with the less-than-orthodox by being examples of faithfulness, by clearly pointing out to the former the error of their ways, and by limiting their personal fellowship with them in the hope that this will bring them round. The constant exhortations to the faithful not to be drawn down the same path suggest that ecclesiastical fellowship was not broken, and in all the examples we have, this level of fellowship seems to have been maintained.

There is no suggestion anywhere that any of this would be different if the unorthodox were in the position of overseers, ie bishops.

Separation and division, therefore, is not the scriptural response, and we must assume that the biblical thing to do is to stay together, regardless of how unorthodox our bishops or our fellow-communicants may be, and to begin as soon as possible the task of refuting those who argue that homosexual activity is in accordance with God's will for some

Christians. What we must do is to confute them as persuasively as we can, have as little personal fellowship with them as possible, and provide a better example for those wavering.

It seems impossible to argue from Scripture that it is appropriate to divide the church over this issue, and the search for a 'better bishop' is explicitly ruled out for Anglicans by Article XXVI (Prayer Book p 873). The appropriate response for the orthodox when 'receiving', as the Article puts it, the ministry of an unorthodox bishop or priest is to mourn so that he repents, and to pray publicly in his presence for his repentance when given the opportunity. Communion could be received from him, as Article XXVI says explicitly, but any fellowship with him that can be avoided, should be avoided.

We may wish Jesus had given us an easier way, but He didn't. Those to whom this will seem like an inadequate response must be reminded that the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God (James 1.20), and that it is not for us to pass judgment on the servant of another—it is before his own master that he stands or falls (Romans 14.4). If we are eager to uphold the scriptural prohibition of homosexual behaviour, let us be as eager to uphold its position on dealing with false teaching and immorality. It may be more effective than any of us can imagine, and it is God's word to us, whatever the result.

The question that faces most of us is not 'what to do when a fellow Christian or a Christian leader openly violates the clear teaching of Scripture' but 'what is the biblical response for the rest of us when those who are in a position to exercise discipline aren't doing so', or aren't doing so fast enough, or don't seem to be willing to do more than admonish and so on. The guidance of Scripture for those who can't exercise discipline is continued faithful witness. In Corinth, Paul was able to persuade the congregation that the person whose immoral lifestyle they had been tolerating was to be expelled from the church. In Ill John 10, it is the false teacher Diotrephes who was more persuasive, and who convinced the church to expel some of the godly and faithful. What were the rest of the faithful to do about this? To avoid any fellowship with them that might suggest toleration of their false teaching, but to continue to live faithfully in the church until John can visit and set things right. I can find no example in Scripture of someone leaving a church because of its failings, nor do I understand how it would be discipline if there were such an example. A PECUSA parish leaving PECUSA is not exercising discipline, it is leaving a problem that it does not know how to deal with.

Some have appealed to the history of the church for guidance in this matter, and offered the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century as an example of leaving a church that has departed from Scriptural standards. But this too can be seen as encouragement to the 'patient endurance' recommended in the New Testament : for many decades the gulf between the Reformers and the Roman Church was much like the gulf currently existing between 'conservative' and 'liberal' Anglicans, but the Reformers

did not leave; rather it was the Roman Church that excommunicated the Reformers in the end.

May the Lord bless all members of the Episcopal Church as we wrestle with these difficult issues.