

DISINHERITANCE OF 'DEVIANTS'

Jesus lambasted the Scribes and Pharisees for being meticulous about paying tithes and neglecting 'the weightier matters of the Law; justice and mercy and faith'. The church must always take care not to fall into some similar error, through fastening on one controversial subject and neglecting 'weightier matters' – even risking dividing the church on a matter which is not central to Christian faith.

The mosaic Law condemned homosexuality. What are we to make of that? There it is explicitly forbidden. 'You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination' Yet when barriers to the Aaronic priesthood are listed homosexuality is not included – and there are plenty other barriers

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying 'Speak to Aaron and say: 'No one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long; or one who has a broken foot or broken hand; or a hunchback or a dwarf or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or damaged testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come to offer the Lord's offerings...' (Leviticus 21.16-24)

We have no right to pick out just what we want from the Mosaic dispensation. In for a penny, in for a pound. We would have to adopt all the cleansing rituals – including that of women after childbirth (as if that made her unclean!), refusing to acquire shirts or blouses made of different fibres (such as cotton and 'man-made') to name but two prohibitions. What we are called to do is to identify what belongs to Jesus Christ's way and avoid what does not – we must walk with the Spirit along our own Emmaus road.

Dealing with natural reactions

In the New Testament, Paul will shift gear at times. He will argue from what is considered to be natural in place of what is theologically valid. Lesbianism and homosexuality are a case in point. In the letter to the Romans he gives vent to his own aversion and disgust: 'Their women changed natural intercourse for unnatural; and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women became consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men, and received in their own persons the due penalty of their error' (1.26,27)

What is deemed 'natural' or 'unnatural' refers to common social understanding of appropriate and inappropriate attitudes and conduct. These change from time to time and vary from culture to culture. Paul here deals with conformity to social and traditional norms as they were at that time. He also deals 'with what is 'natural' when he addresses the question of women's hair - treated as having significance according to its appropriate length (a sign of subservient humility).

The low status of women socially was marked at public worship by their wearing a veil or a hood – or at least having long hair as a covering. The tradition Paul faced is described thus:

'Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head – it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved'. (the mark of an adulteress) – see 1 Corinthians 11.4,5.

Paul gets his knickers in a twist when he adopts natural categories to deal with what belongs to the realm of grace. He seems to be impatient at being diverted from 'weightier matters'; and shows an awareness, at the end, of the weakness of the

argument he develops.

It starts with the contemporary assumption that the husband is the head of the wife whom, in that society, he was assumed to own. Taking it at that level he asks what may naturally be looked for: 'Does not nature itself teach you if a man wears long hair it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair it is her glory' (1 Corinthians 11.14,15). He finishes lamely as if unconvinced by his own thinking based on what is natural and what unnatural: 'But if someone is disposed to contest this – we have no such custom nor do the churches of God' (1 Corinthians 11.16)

When Paul uses categories of 'natural' and 'unnatural' he is ill at ease compared with times when he develops a theological basis. No wonder! What professional footballers or musicians or painters would consider long hair to be a disgrace? My mother thought that it was natural for men to smoke but unnatural for women; natural for men to wear trousers unnatural for women. Times change. What is considered natural today will sound strange tomorrow.

On being 'in Christ'

Paul changes back to the gear which urges his life forward, asking what it means to be 'in Christ'. Aversions may lead to understandable antipathy but must not provide the final standing ground of Christians. Leprosy is horrific. John Bell starts a hymn (533 Church Hymnary 4th edition) thus:

'Will you come and follow me
if I but call your name
will you go where you don't know
and never be the same?
Will you let your love be shown,
will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown
in you and you in me?'

and goes on:

'Will you kiss the leper clean....'

When in my work for the World Council of Churches I stayed with the poor in Africa, Asia and Latin America there were times when I encountered foul smells which produced in me a strong revulsion. Nothing wrong with that – it was quite natural. What would have been wrong would have been to let it have the last word. The aversion had to be overcome if we were to live together as one in Christ Jesus.

Paul drives his theological thinking forward to deal with different forms of natural repugnance, relating these to the claim on Christians to guide their conduct by what it means to be 'in Christ':

'As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female – all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3. 27,28).

The letter to the Romans, in which Paul shares the reaction of abhorrence he has with regard to Lesbianism and Homosexuality was written around 57 A.D. We see Paul clarifying his mind in the next five years or so, so that in the letter to the Colossians in the early 60's he broadens out his understanding of how people regarded as unacceptable are to be treated once they are seen to be 'in Christ':

‘...you have stripped off the old self with the practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In this renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free but Christ is all and in all’ (Colossians 3. 9-11)

Jesus said ‘The things I do you are to do also; and greater things than these shall you do because I go to the Father’. We are meant to build on and extend the understanding of what being ‘in Christ’ means for different types of people in different stages of history – the Colossians statement begins that process. Lesbianism and Homosexuality are not adopted as means for fingering noses at society. They belong to the makeup of a considerable number of the human race, created by God in the image of God. Traces of different orientations can be discerned in the womb. They are native to the self of some human beings, not adopted by them. Samaritans, tax gatherers such as Zaccheus and sinners, physical and social lepers are in Christ given new status. We are called to treat them accordingly.

To leave it at that would be too ungenerous. We need to see in Lesbians and Homosexuals who are Christians a special treasure to enhance the life of the church. They provide witness to the fact that the church is to be an inclusive community, embracing especially some on whom sections of society frowns where all excluded are given a welcome and a significant place at all levels of service in the church.

Human Worth

The affirmation of human worth in the eyes of God is good news in the bible. It occurs in the first chapter of Genesis. To co-manage the creation as junior partners ‘God created humankind in his image in a likeness to himself he created them male and female he created them’.

In current advertising the idea of human worth is trivialised. Use a product to get a little more smoothness of skin or a little more shine in hair, we are told. ‘You are worth it’ – you who, whoever you are, are made in the image and likeness of God!

The idea of the perfect is much used in advertising – the perfect dish, the perfect gift, the perfect life-partner. The word suggests accomplishment of something supremely appropriate for what is wanted. The idea of perfection provided by Jesus Christ stems from a quite different understanding of what matters in life. He called on his followers to be perfect, not in the way that the prescription dictates for entering the Aaronic priesthood (those who have one leg longer than another are prohibited!), not with the superficial sheen of triumph which advertising endlessly advocates, but ‘*be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect*’. That means that we look to the nature of God to discover how to fulfil life’s purpose and be ourselves fulfilled. In the first chapter of John’s gospel Jesus is proclaimed as having ‘the glory of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth’. The Greek word for perfect comes from the noun ‘telos’, a goal to be sought. The goal of life should not be marked by outstanding individual achievements or perquisites, such as are headlined in papers, but in lives growing with others, more and more rounded and complete through participation in the transformation of all things. The word would not be used of ‘high achievers’ in some of life’s spheres whose life stories might be called ‘successes’, if their public work were accompanied by an incapacity to relate lovingly to others, to a spouse and

children, to friends. The context in which Jesus speaks affirms the central importance of love. 'Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect' points to growth throughout life in grace, truth and love to play a part in realising the goal – a world marked by justice, truth and peace. The word 'sanctification' has a somewhat similar flavour. It implies growth in the calling to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect not by separation from the world but separation *for* God *in* the world – that is, taking God's way for the world's good.

So the biblical understanding of perfection does not separate out sheep from goats – that is left to Jesus at the end. Peter got a telling reminder of this as recorded in Acts 10. The question was whether membership of the church should be opened up to those not 'of the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort 'a devout man who feared God with all his household' had a vision in which he was told by an angel that his prayers had been heard by God. He should send to Joppa to make contact with Simon Peter. In preparation for that encounter Peter also had a vision. He saw heaven open and something like a large sheet being lowered holding all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. The command came 'Get up, Peter, kill and eat'. But in Peter's tradition creatures were divided into those considered clean and unclean. So he refuses 'I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean'. He is answered 'What God has made clean you are not to call profane'. This happened three times and struck home. Humanity had not to be divided into the clean and acceptable and the unclean fit only for rejection. The worth of all human beings was their being made in the image and likeness of God. If that likeness had been blemished the point would be to restore it, not to make fish and flesh of human beings. So when he met the envoys of Cornelius, he welcomed the chance to meet the man himself. He found him ready, accompanied by relatives and close friends. To them Paul said 'God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean'.

Scapegoating

In the Old Testament practice, on the Day of Atonement the whole people confessed their sins and asked for forgiveness. The high priest, symbolically laying his hand on the head of a goat, burdened it with the sins of the people for which he had previously offered sacrifice. The goat was driven away to die in the wilderness as a sign that the people's sins had been driven away, putting them again into an at-one-ment relationship with God.

For those who truly longed for forgiveness this could express dramatically both the reality of their sins and the reality of God's pardon. But, as was shown in the New Testament, it took Jesus Christ's sacrifice of his life to make a real change. The poor goat had done nothing to deserve its fate. The word 'scapegoat' is used to describe human beings made victims of the ill-will or guilt of others who wanted a way out from sinful situations by laying the blame on others to divert from themselves burdens of guilt or shame.

What is consistent about scapegoating is that it contradicts God's wide embrace – people all made in his image and likeness; Jesus Christ's life sacrificed for the world and all its inhabitants; the Holy Spirit's endowment of all people with gifts to take part in the transformation of the world, in justice, truth and peace.

Hitler made Jews scapegoats, stirring up hatred as a distraction from his imperial designs.

In the story of Job 'Comforters' tried to make him feel guilty, ascribing his suffering

to sins he must have committed and refused to acknowledge. Jesus, when his disciples attributed a man's blindness to the sins of the parents and himself, told them there was no such connection. What was before them was a chance to show the grace of God.

'Pro-lifers' could scapegoat those who sought or offered abortion. But they were ready, in Nicaragua, to pronounce a death sentence on women whose lives, in a difficult pregnancy, could be saved only by an abortion. As in the case of the woman taken in adultery, Jesus took surrounding circumstances seriously into account.

A scapegoating example

The present government is guilty of a particularly shameful form of scapegoating. It is as if the poorest and most vulnerable were treated like a goat and the sins of those in power were loaded on it to be driven into the wilderness while the real sinners breathed easily. The ploy is used to distract attention from failed economic policies; from promises made to gain power and then broken; from a double-dip recession produced by a government wedded to a market-led failed ideology; from one way austerity which lands most heavily on the poor and vulnerable and cushions the wealthy (those who have disproportionately benefited from society should be disproportionately severely taxed)

Its appeal is to a low form of human nature inflaming the spirit of envy, encouraging some to think that others get off with favours which they are denied. It encourages spite. It divides society. It treats welfare as if it were a gratuitous and generous form of bounty granted to the undeserving. In reality the first call on any elected government is the welfare of the inhabitants whatever their state and needs. It uses the word 'scroungers' both for those who have low-paid work and the unemployed and disprivileged for whom their own policies have reduced opportunities of employment and sometimes of mere survival.

It is despicable that well-heeled millionaires in power should treat other human being so. Real scroungers are to be found in their own class, mopping up, without working for them, inherited advantages, privileged access to financial ventures, subsidies for land left untilled, income from wind-farms – you name it.

Sacramental 'Deviants'

The fencing of the sacramental table in the Reformed tradition was a practice which had as its aim the encouragement of responsible participation in what was significantly called 'the Action'. It was not that people had to be pure and clean to take part – they came as they were. It was to help people to take thought about what was implied. Then they would come open to fresh understanding of the provision Jesus Christ made by leaving us the sacrament, or be under conviction that they should not partake till some hindrance in their own life and conduct was dealt with.

In the 12 years of our ministry in Rosyth there were very many baptisms. Yet I know that I was called at times 'the man who winna baptise'. That was only half the reality. The rest was '...unless you are prepared to sit down with him and be clear about what you are doing'. I thought it gain if somebody said after such a think through 'I had just wanted the bairn done tae please the wife. Now that I see what I'm letting us in for, I want tae withdraw my request'. Baptisms were in the face of the congregation. In one instance a man in his seventies and a baby of a few weeks were baptised in the same service. If, say, in the case where a mother had some difficulty in coming to church, the service in the home would be announced as a church service in which neighbours and others were invited to take part.

Participation in sacramental action called for a thoughtful, prayerful approach. People need to take seriously the implications of sacramental participation. There may be times when people do not bar themselves but are barred. In our tradition that at times meant exclusion for unacceptable conduct. Theologically there should have been a division between careless participation and humble, contrite participation. The sacrament is for sinners.

But sometimes a ban could properly be imposed. In the headquarters in El Salvador of Bishop Oscar Romero I was told that the crowning event which produced his assassination was his intention to refuse the sacramental elements to members of the military junta who imposed their will on the people wrecking lives by torture and death. I had no means of checking whether the observation was merely conjecture or well-established. In El Salvador the military felt they could work their will and still treat the Mass as a means of keeping them right with God. In such case, partaking in the Mass had become a superstitious practice used as a kind of magical cover up. Partaking may be looked on as an insurance policy. Then the whole meaning of the sacrament gets twisted and lost.

But the sacrament may be debarred from some not because they are deviants in faith but deviants from a particular traditional understanding. Now there is a proper requirement that people who want to share in a tradition which is new to them should take time and care to understand it. But there can be a blanket ban even where the most sensitive and knowledgeable approach is counted unacceptable. Such conduct can be encountered in some evangelical traditions such as the Closed Brethren who will even exclude wives and refuse to eat with them. But the most prominent example is the official stance of the Roman Catholic church.

The word 'Catholic'

The word 'catholic' is an 'including' word. To use it of one denominational position turns the meaning on its head. This may be done carelessly with people who don't bother to use two words but make one do. It may also be done as a claim to be the true form of church. This attitude was quite absent in the Vatican II Council. Participants spoke of themselves accurately as Roman Catholics, catholics in the Roman tradition.

Jesus prayed to the Father that his followers might become one as they were one, that the world might believe that he was the one sent by the Father. In his book 'Dominoes Jesus' the present pope treats other churches as not being real churches. That is a mere unfounded assertion. What conviction will the world be given if one tradition exalts itself over others? Pope John XXIII's description 'separated brethren' should be honoured.

Traditions can close in or open out. 'It is not the children of the flesh who are children of God – the children of the promise count as descendants'. 'If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise'. God is not bound by traditions. Succession 'according to the flesh' can be used or bypassed by God at will. Living traditions both honour and re-examine their past.

The nature of sacraments rules out any possibility of exclusive ownership of right understanding of what the Action means.

The Latin word 'sacramentum' means a soldier's oath and the sense of total commitment is to be retained in understanding the word. But, in the life of the early church its character was understood as 'mysterion', something you could not get hold of and put into words; you had to remain open to the impact of the Spirit, to depths of

experience and perception. The word ‘mysterion’ is found in the gospels in only one context. Jesus answering a question of disciples on parables said that the secret depths of the kingdom of God which he had shared with them had been accessible by others only in the form of parables. Pauline texts use the word in 21 places. In the early centuries of the church it was definitively used of the sacrament of communion. Word formulae to patrol the way the sacrament is understood and used must be ruled out of court – the effect goes beyond words. There is a profundity which no word formulae can embrace. All that can be done is to prepare participants for what God in Christ provides through the Spirit, as he offers his whole being to engage with ours. The principle of reception tells its story. All over the world exclusive claims have been discarded in practice. People would have been taken aback, upset, if I had not partaken with them in the Mass. On one occasion I was with representatives of Missionary Societies from different traditions in Rome. Bishop Patrick Kalilombe spoke to us on the approach to a mass which lay ahead. Basically what he said was ‘If you know what you are doing be ready to partake; if you don’t know, it may be better to refrain’. The value of this was that there was no separation of sheep and goats. Roman Catholics were with others in sorting out the extent of their understanding of the meaning of a Mass. The assumption that ‘signed-on’ Roman Catholics are, as such, clear about the meaning of what they do cannot stand. Look at the custom in some parts of Ireland where men stand apart for the main part of the Mass and join in for partaking the elements – how close is that to superstition? In the first gathering of Orthodox, reformed and Lutheran church representatives with an equal number of Roman Catholics, alongside the Vatican II Council, the first day started with a Mass, the second with an Orthodox Eucharist and I was asked to provide a Reformed communion service to begin the third. Roman Catholics waited for me at the end. Where did you get that service? How has it in it things which we want to get into the Mass? It was simply in the Reformed tradition. I was also asked to conduct a Reformed communion service at the heart of the Laity Congress in 1967. Afterwards I was first met by two Anglicans: ‘How thoughtless of you! You know that, at this stage of relationships, we cannot partake, yet you asked us to handle the bread and wine and pass it on – to handle and not partake was cruel!’ Behind them come a couple of Roman Catholics: ‘We want you to know how we appreciated your sensitiveness. You knew that we could not share in the full service, yet you gave us a part in allowing us to serve our neighbours’.

There can be a time to refrain personally from partaking.

When, many blue moons ago, I was asked to speak at the Annual Gathering of the Justice and Peace movement in Scotland I chose not to participate in the Mass. The disturbance which this caused after I had become very much part of the community who gathered, had a creative effect in reminding people that, at that point, my exclusion was part of the official policy of the Roman Catholic church.

There come times to participate fully in Masses and still bring a critical edge to bear. That great Columban, Eamonn O’Brien, naturally included me in making up a party to visit Chinese churches some years ago. In Wuhan we summed up the fruitfulness of the visit in a Mass. ‘Wasn’t that a marvellous concelebration?’ he said to me afterwards. I said ‘You’ve found the right word. It was truly a great celebration and it was also a con’. ‘What do you mean?’ ‘Half the world’s population, half the membership of the church were unrepresented in the presiding body’.

What authority, objective and not self-generated, can replace Jesus Christ’s full headship in the sacrament which he left as a means for his present resurrected life to

enter into the community of believers, transforming them to transform the world?

