
It's About Theology, Not Territory

Friday, December 5, 2008

Christian leaders formerly associated with the Episcopal Church have announced the creation of a new denomination — the Anglican Church in North America. The announcement came Wednesday as conservative Anglican leaders met in Wheaton, Illinois to plan for a future province of the Anglican Communion — in this case a province determined by theological conviction, not geographical designation.



As *The New York Times* reported:

Conservatives alienated from the Episcopal Church announced on Wednesday that they were founding their own rival denomination, the biggest challenge yet to the authority of the Episcopal Church since it ordained an openly gay bishop five years ago.

The move threatens the fragile unity of the Anglican Communion, the world's third-largest Christian body, made up of 38 provinces around the world that trace their roots to the Church of England and its spiritual leader, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The strange part of that account is the statement that this move “threatens the fragile unity of the Anglican Communion.” That fragile unity was shattered by the actions of more liberal churches in North America to bless same-sex unions, ordain homosexual ministers, and elect an openly-homosexual bishop. The *lack* of unity is what has prompted the establishment of this new denomination.

Indeed, this division among the Anglicans and related national churches can be traced directly back to the Anglican Communion's failure to establish and maintain doctrinal boundaries and a clear affirmation of biblical authority. Liberals and conservatives have been increasingly at odds over a host of issues related to biblical authority.

The action of the American church, the Episcopal Church USA, to elect and consecrate an openly-homosexual man as Bishop of New Hampshire in 2003 set the stage for what now appears to be a schism in the church.

From *The Guardian* [London]:

The constitution comes in the wake of a conference held in Israel last June with leaders from more than one-half of the world's 77 million Anglicans. At that conference, the leaders outlined their intentions to, in their view, reform, heal and revitalise the Anglican Communion by adhering to a more literal interpretation of the Bible.

“The public release of our draft constitution is an important concrete step toward the goal of a biblical, missionary and united Anglican Church in North America,” said Bishop Robert Duncan of Pittsburgh, moderator of Common Cause Partnership.

Duncan, who was deposed by bishops in the Episcopal Church in September, was elected as the new province's first Archbishop, and thus the first Primate of the Anglican Church in North America.

The fact that the Wheaton announcement framed the issue theologically was not missed by the national media. *The Washington Post* reported that the new province would be “one that would be based less on geography than on theology.” *The New York Times* explained that, “for the first time, a province would be defined not by geography, but by theological orientation.”

The announcement of the Anglican Church in North America is good news. The big question is just how many churches and dioceses will join this new province and depart the Episcopal Church. Officials with the Episcopal Church sought to downplay the development, suggesting that the new group was rejecting the denomination’s commitment to diversity. In the eyes of those forming the Anglican Church in North America, the Episcopal Church has rejected the Bible.

The schism within the Anglican Communion is painful to watch and even more painful to endure. There are difficult questions ahead, including the response of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. There are other provinces ready to recognize the Anglican Church in North America [ACNA], but no one knows exactly how many. There are also unsettled issues within the leaders of the ACNA, and some of these are theologically significant.

Nevertheless, the fact that the establishment of the Anglican Church of North America was motivated by explicitly theological concerns and commitments is a sign of hope. The battle for biblical authority arises again and again, and it is good that these leaders recognize the centrality of this commitment.

In the end, the greatest achievement of this new group may be to make one point exceedingly clear — the true church is rightly defined by *theology*, not *territory*.

See also: Coverage in *The Los Angeles Times*.

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