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Heresy in the Cathedral: Bishop Chane's Christmas Message

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The latest evidence comes from the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, DC. On Christmas Day, the Right Reverend John Bryson Chane, Bishop of Washington and Dean of the Cathedral, delivered a Christmas sermon presumably intended to offer inspiration for the occasion. Bishop Chane declared that Christmas is a miracle. Against the secularism of the day, the Bishop commended his congregation to believe that miracles still occur. "We are here," the Bishop declared, "in Washington and in churches and homes stretched across this great American landscape and throughout the world to remember and to celebrate the powerful truth that miracles can and do happen!" So good, so far.

Throughout his sermon, Bishop Chane asked the question: "What was God thinking?" The bishop pointed to the counter-intuitive reality of the incarnation and declared it to be a miracle. "What was God thinking? That an angel named Gabriel should come into the world and announce to a young, poor, Jewish peasant girl named Mary and to Joseph her betrothed, an itinerant carpenter, and then to nomadic shepherds who lived on the margins of a badly broken, tired, war ridden and religiously divided part of the world ... that this unlikely couple would become the birth parents of God's son. What was God thinking? Many say it never really happened that way! But I say...it was a miracle!"

Notably missing from Bishop Chane's nativity account is any reference to the virgin birth. Instead, Joseph and Mary are referred to as "the birth parents of God's son." Just what he meant by that is unclear, but it certainly seems to by-pass the virgin birth, if not to deny it.

Bishop Chane continued on his nativity theme by pointing to the mission of Jesus and calling upon Christians "to make a difference in the world by loving extravagantly, being reconcilers rather than instruments of estrangement, living as peacemakers rather than war makers, becoming providers of abundance rather than purveyors of scarcity, and being conductors of harmony rather than the orchestrators of dissonance."

There was nothing in the bishop's sermon that had anything to do with identifying Jesus as the Messiah nor did he make any reference to the work of Christ in the salvation of sinners. The bishop pointed to a very this-worldly gospel centered on social progressivism, tolerance, and calls for peace. None of this is surprising—especially coming from a leader of mainline Protestantism. But what came next is nothing less than shocking.

In an incredible turn, Bishop Chane went on to ask three parallel questions: "And what was God thinking ... when the Angel Gabriel was sent by God to reveal the Law to Moses? And what was God thinking ... when the Angel Gabriel was sent by God to reveal the sacred Quran to the prophet Muhammad? And what was God thinking ... when the Angel Gabriel was sent by God to reveal the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God?"

Those three sentences betray a strange and explosive combination of biblical illiteracy and theological heresy. Just in case we misunderstood his intention, the bishop went on to make his point clear. He reflected on his three questions and asked if these were "just random acts of association and coincidence," and then asserted by the shape of his question that "the Angel Gabriel who appears as the named messenger of God in the Jewish Old Testament, the Christian New

Testament Gospels, and the Koran of Islam, [is] really the same miraculous messenger of God who proclaimed to a then emerging religious, global community and to us this morning that we are ALL [his emphasis] children of the living God?" The bishop further insisted, "as such we are called to acknowledge that as Christians, Jews, and Muslims we share a common God and the same divine messenger. And that as children of the same God, we are now called to cooperatively work together to make the world a haven for harmony, peace, equality, and justice for the greatest and least among us."

This convoluted argument is breathtaking in its audacity. Most significantly, the Episcopal Bishop of Washington has declared that God sent the Angel Gabriel to reveal the Quran to Muhammad. This theological adventure must surely mark a milestone in the theological decline of the Episcopal Church, USA. The theological left is now firmly committed to a radical inclusivism that declares all religions to be true and none to be false. This extreme form of pluralism is now the reigning worldview of liberal divinity schools and the bureaucracies of liberal Protestantism. But Bishop Chane has now ventured where even the most audacious revisionists of Christian theology have yet not dared to go—he claimed the divine inspiration of the Quran.

The fact that Bishop Chane chose Christmas Day to declare that the Angel Gabriel revealed the Quran to Muhammad must be seen as tragic evidence that the theological left is now growing detached from even the last vestiges of biblical reality. Did the congregation in the National Cathedral understand what they were hearing?

Has Bishop Chane actually read the Quran? Does he now mean to identify the Quran as the inspired and literally dictated Word of God as it is claimed to be by Muhammad and his followers? Does he now intend to identify himself with the teachings of the Quran? This would be the inescapable conclusion reached by anyone who heard his message.

But a more significant question intrudes. Has Bishop Chane read the Bible? In his first of these questions, Bishop Chane asked what God was thinking "when the angel Gabriel was sent by God to reveal the Law to Moses." The Angel Gabriel is identified by name four times in the Bible. In the only Old Testament references [Daniel 8:16 and 9:21], Gabriel is the divine messenger to Daniel. In the Gospel of Luke, the Angel Gabriel spoke to Zechariah [Luke 1:19] and to Mary [Luke 1:26]. Gabriel's declaration to Mary that she, though a virgin, would conceive the Christ indicates the prominence of this angel in the Bible. Nevertheless, there is no biblical reference to Gabriel having anything to do with God revealing the Law to Moses. To the contrary, God revealed the Law directly to Moses at Mt. Sinai [Exodus 19:18-25].

In a twisted form of theological imagination, Bishop Chane identifies the Angel Gabriel as "the same miraculous messenger of God "who was instrumental in the establishment of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam." From this argument the bishop went on to call upon his congregation to aim for global peace, religious harmony, and social progress.

To say the very least, this sermon—taken by itself—would indicate a serious theological problem. Nevertheless, the Episcopalians of Washington must be getting accustomed to Bishop Chane's liberal teachings by now.

In October, Bishop Chane presented a lecture as part of the Amram Scholar Series at the Washington Hebrew Congregation. In this address, "Christian Fundamentalism and its Impact and the Impact of Fundamentalism in General and the Future of Global Stability," the bishop pointed to "new interpretive changes in scriptural understanding and theological meaning in Judaism, Islam and Christianity, the three great theistic religions of the world." He identified fundamentalism as the great evil of the day and assured his listeners that he would have nothing to do with fundamentalism in any form. Of course, the threshold for fundamentalism in Bishop Chane's worldview is very low. Evidently, a fundamentalist is simply one who holds to traditional Christian teaching and believes that the Bible is to be taken as true.

In Bishop Chane's view, taking the Bible as the inerrant and authoritative Word of God "is a recipe for disaster." He pointed to Mel Gibson's soon-to-be-released movie, *The Passion*, as evidence of such dangers, simply because of Gibson's effort to portray the Gospel accounts. Bishop Chane asserted: "References in the Gospels and in other New Testament writings used during Holy Week for Christians, especially on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, are blatantly anti-Semitic and are also incorrect translations of the events that they describe." Watch that sentence carefully. Bishop Chane identifies the gospels as "blatantly anti-Semitic" and also claims that they are "incorrect translations of the events that they describe." This is altogether different than arguing that a particular translation from the ancient texts is in error. To the contrary, Bishop Chane is obviously claiming that the Gospels incorrectly account for the events leading up to the crucifixion and death of Christ.

Mel Gibson's movie comes under criticism because he treats the four New Testament gospels, of all things, "as if they were linear and accurate historic, textual sources." The bishop's response: "They are not and cannot be!" As the bishop continued, he lamented that "a certain narrow segment of Christianity can be found guilty of condemning that which it truly does not understand." Of course, the bishop does understand. In his view, the New Testament simply cannot be taken as a reliable historical text.

In his Amram lecture, Bishop Chane went on to criticize Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell for their criticism of Islam. At the same time, he went on to endorse retired Bishop John Shelby Spong, who denies the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection, and argues that the apostle Paul was a repressed homosexual. He also endorsed the Jesus Seminar and various other left-wing thinkers and movements. He even cited Professor Don Cupitt as an authority--without acknowledging that Cupitt is an atheist.

Of course, Bishop Chane is a keen supporter of the election of his denomination's first openly-homosexual bishop. In an interview with PBS he explained, "Scripture can be read in a multiplicity of ways. If we, in fact, believe that everybody is equal in God's eyes, then how in God's name can we say that we don't have enough theology to work this issue through? And how can we say that a person's sexuality does not allow them to enter into the full life of this communion?" When church leaders begin talking about a controversial issue by claiming that the Bible "can be read in a multiplicity of ways," count on something very unbiblical to be asserted. That's cover for denying biblical authority and imposing theological revisionism.

Theological liberals are well positioned in prominent pulpits and posts of leadership. Their agenda is clear for all who have eyes to see. They will not rest until Christianity is transformed into a form of postmodern spirituality that is completely disconnected from the Bible and the historic faith of the Church.

Bishop Chane built his Christmas message around the question, "What was God thinking?" The tragic and more pressing reality in this case is what the bishop was thinking. His Christmas message offered heresy in the Cathedral.

