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Marking the Boundaries

As the establishment of a separate, orthodox Anglican, province in North America proceeds Chris Pierce, an Anglican minister in the USA, reflects on the need for theological boundaries within any such province.

Nothing breeds turmoil like a lack of boundaries. This, I believe is true in every aspect of human existence and I believe especially so within the life of the Church. Recall to mind what theological aberrations have arisen since the received revelation became the received suggestions. I write therefore to make an argument for a return to biblically supported, time honoured theological boundaries.

Crossing the boundaries

From the very beginning of time God has set forth boundary markers for His people. Adam and Eve had the run of Eden but could not eat of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the Garden. We live daily with the rippling effects of their early disregard of the boundaries set forth by our Creator.

Moses disregarded the boundary God has set forth for him when he struck the rock. His disobedience brought forth God's punishment. He could not enter the Promised Land but only see it from a distance.

The people of Israel ignored boundary markers (the Ten Commandments) of acceptable practice that God had set for them by engaging in the worshipping of other gods, forgetting the Sabbath, indulging in sexual immorality and the like. The abandonment of the boundaries gave rise to sin and sin had to be punished. For seventy years they felt the heel of an oppressor nation on their necks. Untold misery was their diet; families were separated, their homes were destroyed, their property lost, their dignity forfeited. All this was because they would not heed the boundary markers set by Creator God, the One who spoke and the world leapt into existence, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Ignoring the boundaries

Boundaries serve as invaluable lines of demarcation in a variety of ways and not just in the life of the Church. Think, for instance, of an airline pilot flying a plane on which you are a passenger. He knows. He knows all the design characteristics of the aircraft. He knows how fast it will safely fly. He knows the proper airspeed to maintain in order to avoid stalling and a catastrophic crash. Every time you get on an airplane to make a trip, your well being, your very life is in the hands of someone else. Imagine what turmoil would be incited in your soul if before setting off the pilot announced over the intercom "Today we will be flying at 15,000 feet. We should be flying at 37,000 feet where we have clear airspace but it will be much more exciting for me to dodge amongst all the light aircraft at this lower altitude. If you see any of those puddle jumpers getting too close just call out to your stewardess. So, strap yourself in good and tight and enjoy the flight."

How big would be the rush to get off that plane before it left the ground? Panic would ensue. Why? Because the pilot was openly willing to ignore the boundaries which had been established with great forethought and experience. No one could be willing to get in the air on an aircraft whose pilot publicly considered others' lives so carelessly.

Boundaries for the Church

Boundaries are essential in all areas of life and I am convinced that we orthodox Anglicans must work towards the reestablishment of the theological boundaries laid out for us in our Thirty-nine Articles of Religion. The Articles are a worthy, time honoured and biblically derived set of theological boundary markers of orthodox Christian belief and practice. They are most specific in regard to those theological points upon which there can be no dispute; i.e justification by grace, the authority of scripture, the Holy Trinity, salvation through Christ alone, the Resurrection, original sin, free will and so on. They specifically repudiate those theological positions which had been adopted by Rome that were not supportable by the Scripture. Such false teaching as justification by the sacraments, the superstition of purgatory and the re-sacrificing of Christ Jesus at the mass, wherein the common elements are substantially changed in nature to the very body and blood of our Saviour, are all rejected.

The Articles are, for the most part, benignly neglected in North America today. In the Prayer Book of 1979 they are relegated to the “Historical Document” section. Yet, they were specifically adopted in 1801 and as yet have not been repealed or repudiated by an act of General Convention and are therefore still formally binding. The only change between the Articles as adopted by ECUSA and the originals had to do with the issue of civil magistrates.

While benignly neglected within official Anglican provinces in North America the Articles are held tightly in other provinces and “continuing” jurisdictions and are required to be subscribed by all clergy. It is in this direction that I suggest the new province must travel; if it is to avoid a slow degeneration of orthodoxy in the USA and Canada.

Subscription to the Articles by all clergy and office holders would provide a broad (as within the boundaries of the orthodox Christian belief and practice) platform from which to bind together orthodox Anglicans. Indeed, that was the original intent of the framers of the Articles when they were composed (1562) and then adopted by Parliament in 1571. One does not have to read past the preface: “Articles of Religion agreed upon by the Archbishops and Bishops of both Provinces and the whole Clergy, in the convocation holden at London in the year 1562 for the avoiding of the diversities of opinions, and for the establishing of consent touching True Religion.”

The word, “subscription” is anathema to some. However, that does not lessen my resolve to work towards the principle. Subscription puts everyone on the same sheet of music. Subscription calls for adherence to those theological doctrines that are substantiated from the clear teaching of God’s Word written. Subscription to the Thirty-nine Articles would redirect North American Anglicanism toward its firm foundation. Subscription, in short, would serve the same purpose as the channel buoys one finds in navigable rivers and intra-costal waterways. Ships sail with no fear of running aground so long as they keep within the boundary markers.