

Interpreting the Bible and Fellowship among Christians:
a response to Canon Colin Craston
(CEN article (28.08.03))

I am very glad indeed that Colin Craston has affirmed the supremacy of Scripture in the life of the Church so unambiguously (*CEN 28.08.03*). He is right to point out that a concern for unity cannot lead us to put experience above the clear teaching of the Bible. He raises two questions regarding the interpretation of Scripture and the nature of communion or fellowship. It is to these concerns of his that I now turn.

From the very beginning, the Bible has been interpreted in a number of ways: historical, allegorical and moral. By the time of the Reformation such interpretation had become so elaborate and so obscure that the Reformers rightly emphasised the *clarity* of Scripture in matters having to do with salvation, including, of course, the living of the Christian life. They did not deny the need for hermeneutics or the science of interpretation. In fact, it was the Reformation and its aftermath which created the tradition of studying the Bible in many of the ways which are still current. The text has to be reliably established, the background to books, and passages within them, investigated, attempts made to recover the oral tradition which may lie behind the written word and the purpose of a text and of its author clarified. The whole of this work has also to be related to the varying contexts in which the Gospel is preached and lived.

We must be wary, however, of making the Christian faith an exclusive preserve of the learned. Tyndale wanted every plough-boy in the land to have direct access to the Bible so that even the simplest may experience its demand on them and the grace given for its fulfilment. We must not forget that such access was a central issue at the Reformation. What Tyndale wanted, we should also want: that people should have the Scriptures and know the Scriptures. Of course, it is acknowledged that everyone can benefit from assistance in their reading and study of the Bible but no intermediary is necessary when the Bible discloses God's will for us.

Colin is correct in stating that the moral and social law of the Older Testament remains in force but then, in my opinion, confuses the ceremonial and the moral, as well as the continuing validity of the latter with the legal sanction used to enforce it in particular circumstances. To use his own example, because adultery is no longer punishable by death, does not make in all right! In the same way, Jesus forgives the woman taken in adultery and tells her not to continue in her sin (John 8:11). In the

Bible, the moral law is related to the creation and applies, therefore, to all human societies. This is the basis for the prophetic word against injustice, tyranny and violence not only in Judah and Israel but also amongst their neighbours. (Isa 10:12f, 13:1f, 34, Jer 43:8f, Ezek 25:1f, Jonah etc).

In the New Testament, the starting point surely is Jesus' teaching on marriage? This is based on the creation account of human beings, male and female, made in God's image and given the blessing of growth and of stewardship. (Mark 10:2-12 cf Matt 19:3-9 and Gen 1:27-28). It is the unvarying teaching of the New Testament, and of the Church since then, that the proper place for sexual expression is within the context of marriage. This teaching is based not on proof-texting alone but on a biblical anthropology which sees women and men as made for each other, whose union is possible and can be stable because of their complementarity: social, affective, biological. It is because of this that marriage can be the foundation for the family, the basic building block of society. No other form of sexual relationship can be put on a par with marriage or be regarded as of equivalent validity.

Colin rightly acknowledges Romans 1, 1Cor 6:9 and 1Tim 1:10 as 'decisive' but then goes on to ask whether the kinds of homosexual activity which they deplore can be compared to same-sex couples living together in a committed relationship today. On this issue, I can only recommend a thorough study of Robert Gagnon's *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. Gagnon examines *all* of the evidence and concludes that St Paul was aware of different kinds of homosexual relationships, including those between consenting adults, but found them unacceptable precisely because of the Bible's teaching on marriage and on what is fitting in sexual relationships.

Like some others, Colin asks why, if women can be ordained to public ministry in spite of some biblical texts, homosexual relationships should not also be acceptable in the Church. This is a dangerous argument for it will re-ignite the fears of those who claimed that the ordination of women was a "slippery slope" towards full-scale revisionism. At the time, those who supported the ordination of women argued that at the creation men and women were made equal in dignity and function. Any subordination of the one to the other was a result of the fall, and in the community of the baptised the original intention in creation is recovered so that there is now 'neither male or female' in Christ (Gal 3:28). In such a community, women as well as men can minister in the name of the one who has exalted both so that 'in him' they may be found in God's presence (Eph 2:6). Just as a properly biblical anthropology witnesses to God's purpose in marriage, so

also it witnesses to the fully equal and complementary rôle of women and men in the Church and in society.

On the question of fellowship or communion, Colin points out that inspite of the disagreements between Peter and Paul regarding the place of uncircumcised converts in the Church, fellowship was not broken. It is true that the New Testament places a high value on unity and does not in any way encourage the kind of ecclesial promiscuity described and deplored by Colin. It cannot be denied, however, that there are stern warnings against false teaching (Gal 1:6f, Eph 4:14, 2Tim 4:3f, 2Jn:10) and that there are extreme circumstances in which fellowship may be strained or even fractured (Matt 18:17, 1Cor 5:9ff, 2Cor 6:14ff, 2Thess 3:14f etc). In the early Church also a high value is placed on unity but communion or fellowship between the churches is always on the basis of a common faith and agreement about how Christians should live. In the same way, contemporary ecumenical discussion has focussed on reaching agreement in faith. More recently, there has been an increasing emphasis, in some dialogues, on consensus regarding moral principles, even if some flexibility is allowed in how those principles are applied in day to day life. What is required in relationships *between* churches, should surely also be required for common life *within* churches?

To put it briefly, of course we should be interested in the question of biblical hermeneutics but not at the expense of biblical clarity and, of course, we should be concerned for the unity of Christ's Church but strive with every muscle and sinew in our being to make sure it is unity in love, truth and hope.

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