



STATEMENT DH111

Episcopal Court Demotes Doctrine of Marriage

In September 1990, retired Bishop Walter C. Righter laid hands on the head of Barry Stopfel, a man living openly with a homosexual lover, and ordained him a deacon of the Episcopal Church.

A year later, Bishop John S. Spong — well known for his books, such as *Reclaiming the Bible from Fundamentalism*, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* and *Living in Sin?* — laid hands on Stopfel and ordained him an Episcopal priest.

Five years later, the Court for the Trial of a Bishop has ruled that the Episcopal Church has no doctrine or discipline that prohibited Righter from ordaining Stopfel.

“The Court today is not giving an opinion on the morality of same gender relationships,” insisted seven of the eight bishops who issued an opinion on May 15.

Nevertheless, the court appealed to C. H. Dodd’s book, *The Apostolic Preaching* (1936), to sketch a skeletal “core doctrine” that happens not to include any doctrine of marriage.

The court ruled that “core doctrine” is the only thing protected by Title IV of the Episcopal Church’s “Constitution and Canons,” under which Righter was charged with teaching and acting contrary to church doctrine.

According to the court’s ruling, core doctrine encompasses only these assertions:

God in Christ fulfills the scripture.
God became incarnate in Jesus Christ. Christ was crucified.
Christ was buried.
Christ rose again.
Christ was exalted to God.
God gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit.
There will be a day of judgment.
Therefore repent.

For days after *the* court’s announcement, Episcopal laity and priests wrote in Internet discussion groups of how this “core doctrine” does not include such basic Christian doctrines as the Creation, the Fall, or the Atonement.

The court described the Church’s teaching on marriage not as doctrine but as “doctrinal teaching,” which it equaled with such issues as just-war theory, slavery, and slackened standards on divorce and remarriage. The judges wrote that “for most of its history the Church understood slavery as normative *in* society and acceptable within Christian life and practice.”

“Similarly, the Church for generations also interpreted New Testament passages on divorce and remarriage as a fixed and unchangeable law which prohibited remarriage in the Church after divorce. We have come to see and understand that marriages can die and even be places of destruction which may justify their termination.”

The court ruled that, because no canon (church law) specifically forbids ordaining active homosexuals to the ministry of the Episcopal Church, such ordinations are legal.

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The majority opinion claimed not to address the question of whether bishops *should* therefore ordain active homosexuals to the ministry. Two judges — Roger White, bishop of Milwaukee, and Donis Patterson, retired bishop of Dallas — agreed that no doctrine or discipline forbids ordaining homosexual clergy. But, they wrote, bishops should not ordain such clergy until the Episcopal Church officially approves such ordinations and gives permission through its General Convention.

One bishop, Andrew Fairfield of North Dakota, stood alone in maintaining that both Episcopal Church doctrine and discipline forbid ordaining any clergy who engage in sexual intercourse apart from heterosexual marriage.

Stopfel and his lover, Will Leckie, shook their heads disapprovingly as Fairfield read aloud from his lone dissenting opinion, which quoted from C. S. Lewis's novel *That Hideous Strength*, from Scripture, and from the Episcopal Church's Book of Common Prayer.

Four of the nine bishops on the court have ordained sexually active homosexual priests, assigned such ordinations to assistant bishops, or signed documents supporting such ordinations. The prosecution presented evidence of these actions in December and asked those bishops to excuse themselves from the case. The four bishops refused to step down.

One of those four judges, Frederick Borsch of Los Angeles, resigned from the case on April 17 after the prosecution again challenged his impartiality. Borsch had authorized and permitted his assistant bishop, Chester Talton, to ordain an active homosexual to the priesthood on January 13, after the court had met for one of its two pretrial hearings.

Some Episcopal observers believe the next General Convention, scheduled for July 1997, will authorize homosexual ordination and the development of rites to bless what the court ruling called "life-long, committed, same gender sexual relationships."

Homosexual activists in the Episcopal Church cheered the ruling. The board of Integrity Inc., the gay caucus in the Episcopal Church, said it was "deeply grateful that the Church has listened to the Holy Spirit and has reaffirmed the inclusivity of the Gospel."

"The church," the Integrity statement said, "is now in a position to fully embrace the ministry of its lesbian and gay clergy."

— *Doug LeBlanc*