

# Introduction

In the midst of divisions within the church over the embrace of gay and lesbian persons in committed relationships forming lives together, I want to create the space to think about Christian faith as dying to self and discovering new life in the love of God and neighbor. This is not about Christian faith as spirituality. This is about life given in the life of the church.

Understanding the nature of Christian faith as given in the life of the church is difficult where the church is divided over doctrine and discipline or over matters of manners or morals. In its divisions, the church is not a place of welcome for a journey of faith and love. You can't trust or love what is divided. At the same time, to seek consolation among one's own tribe is to narrow the world and split off conflict and controversy until the larger world all but disappears. In contrast, the unity of the church is a witness to the promise of Christian faith that God in Christ reconciles.

Conflict over "What's right?" offers opportunity as well as temptation. The temptation is to identify narrowly the life of faith with right belief, right worship, right action, right order, in short, to identify holiness with purity as we see purity. The opportunity is to deepen the life of faith in discovering what is central to Christian faith among those who differ. This is to discover what is shared that reconciles and unites.

This book is not an account of Christian faith as a matter of theology—biblically, theologically, morally, sacramentally, or ecclesialogically. Rather, this book addresses conflict, and specifically the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion, over matters of morals, understandings of human sexuality, and whether to affirm and bless same-sex relationships. The purpose is to step back from the polemics about "who's right" to consider the church we have and how we teach—or we should say, how we pass on Christian faith as a gift of the Holy Spirit.

My focus in this book is both local and ecumenical. I am focused on the Episcopal Church in relation to the other churches that constitute the Anglican Communion, and I am focused ecumenically on how those who are part of this particular tradition may be in communion with all who seek to follow Christ. As a Christian moral theologian, I want specifically to help think about moral decision-making and how that may be grounded in the life of the church, again not narrowly in terms of who's right, but in terms of forming a faithful people.

The gospel mandate, says Jesus, is that we who are followers of Christ are to be one as he and the Father are one that the world might believe (Jn 17:23). Our divisions are a scandal to the life that is the central gift of Christ. As Paul says, we are one body, the body of Christ, and we cannot say, "I have no need of you" (1 Cor 12:21). The unity of the church is not only for our sake but is for the sake of the world. If those who follow Christ are not bound in love, they cannot be a witness to the world of the saving work of God revealed in Christ.

I began my first year teaching at an Episcopal seminary at the beginning of the controversies over homosexuality. Students asked me, "Who's right?" Advocacy was the interest of many. I sought instead to create space to help students understand why persons differed in their moral judgments. I hoped to help them understand how Scripture informed understandings of human sexuality and at the same time was "read" or "heard" differently. I also sought to develop appreciation of differences in understandings of the nature of sin and its relationship to power, desire, and the nature of sexual relationships that formed holiness in life. All in all, these matters created for me and for my students a continuing conversation with the history and science of sexuality and, with that, understandings of marriage, family, and patriarchy.

What happened in class often led to more personal conversations outside of class. I was surprised at the number of men and the increasing number of women who shared their experiences and struggles with sexual identity and relations. I was also moved by the integrity they sought, not only personally but in relationship to the church and its teachings. In helping persons to make personal and vocational decisions, I felt strongly what moral theologians have claimed. In matters of moral conflict, we must follow our consciences as informed by our understanding of Christian faith. We must be, as Roman Catholic moral theologian

Bernard Häring said, “free and faithful in Christ.” To do otherwise is to lose our integrity. Our actions then violate and ultimately undermine our sense of self. A divided self finds no rest. Desire and purpose are at odds with our life. This leads to depression or repression, to acting out, to being unable to be honest and present with others, and to feeling unknown and unloved. How we teach became for me the first question in ethics rather than “What’s right?”

My own thoughts on questions of “how we teach” in moral matters that divide the church—what is called the question of ecclesiology and ethics—developed in the 1980s and ’90s. While teaching seminarians, during this time I also had the privilege to serve as a theological consultant for the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church and had the opportunity to work on questions about human sexuality and same-sex relations with congregations, diocesan bishops, and clergy. In the last fifteen years I have had the further opportunity to learn and address these issues as the Episcopal Church has sought to offer a broad account of its understanding of the faithfulness of its actions to ordain gay and lesbian persons and to bless same-sex unions. This included the opportunity to consider the proposed Anglican Covenant with its proposals on structures to enhance the mutual accountability and deepen the relationship of fellowship and communion between Anglican churches. This work has come to a focus in my participation on the Episcopal delegation to the Anglican Roman Catholic Theological Consultation in the U.S.A. (ARC-USA), whose focus from 2007 to 2014 has been on the Christian moral life as formed in the church.

Three areas of study inform this account of moral teaching and the church: ecumenical theology, moral theology, and critical histories of religion and secularization. Understandings of the nature of the church and how churches have variously ordered teaching authority is a central focus of what may be called ecumenical theology as developed in the ecumenical movement. The second area of study is that of moral theology (and Christian ethics, to use these two terms as equivalent). This covers the work on Christian moral teaching in its historical diversity. The third area of study is critical histories that provide comparative accounts of understanding ethics and the ways of moral teaching.

The chapters in this book are not intended to create an argument for what particular churches should do. Instead, I seek to do some “ground clearing” in order to help think about the challenge of being the church

that is local and universal. Again, instead of arguing for what is right, I want to explore how we come to faith in the church and what that means for moral teaching.

I begin in the first chapter by briefly telling the history of the ecumenical movement in terms of the understanding of the church as bearer of Christian faith in the world. This offers the basic terms for thinking about the nature of the church and the questions that must be asked in addressing differences that divide the church. Chapter 2 tells the history of the Episcopal Church in addressing homosexuality and same-sex relations. How these matters were addressed is the story of how the Episcopal Church has taught and shaped its governance. Understanding where the Episcopal Church is—and not where it should be—makes it possible to consider what is possible and what deserves primary attention.

As the conflict over the moral teaching of the Episcopal Church evidences, church divisions are shaped by moral judgments, understandings of the nature and purpose of moral teaching, and questions about the right way of structuring moral authority in the church. These judgments and understandings have developed and changed over time. Chapter 3 seeks to untangle the history of ways of moral teaching, purposes of moral teaching, and the structuring of moral authority. This makes it possible to understand the narrowing of moral teaching to what is right and what are the consequences in ordering moral authority. Given unintended consequences, the guiding claim might be stated, *corruptio optimi quae est pessima*, the corruption of the best is the worst. There is no straight-line development of Christian faith and life. Hence, proposals for moral teaching are often idealistic, ideas without adequate connection to the realities of practices and unintended consequences.

In chapter 4, I turn to the question of church governance as a matter of authority for moral teaching. I tell the story of the ways of ordering the authority to teach. In light of this history, the challenges for the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion come to the fore. Here again, the purpose is not an argument for a particular proposal for governance. Instead, the intent is to describe the development of the Anglican Communion as a communion of churches in a way that clarifies the nature and challenges in the structuring of teaching authority, in short, of governance.

Chapter 5 provides the opportunity to harvest the fruits of these investigations in terms of the nature of Christian ethics and the unity of the church. The claim is that Christian ethics is necessarily ecumenical, for only together in the midst of our differences are we drawn into Christian faith. Christian life and teaching in general, and Christian ethics in particular, are not about a project to be achieved but a life lived. Christian ethics is an ecclesial ethic of formation in faith and moral discernment.

In a final Anglican postscript, I draw some broader conclusions from these chapters about the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion as a communion of self-governing churches. Differences in what is taught and how authority for teaching is structured pose the ecumenical challenge. The development of the Anglican Communion offers the occasion to understand the nature of the unity of the church given these differences. Differences are the occasion for division but are also the opportunity to enter into a fuller union where grace and reconciliation may be known.

Each of these chapters may be read independently of the others. They each may stand alone as an introduction to a particular aspect of Christian faith, the church, and moral teaching. Read together in order, they introduce basic terms, explore assumptions, and draw together conclusions. I have not used footnotes but have included references and bibliographical notes at the end of each chapter. Direct quotations are limited. All of this is my attempt to write this book as an introduction for a broad audience. The notes at the end of each chapter, though, should serve to introduce the range of works across disciplines upon which I draw, make evident my indebtedness, and may lead the reader to this broader literature. Finally, at the conclusion of each chapter are some discussion questions. These may be helpful for book discussions or for study groups focusing on specific chapters.

## NOTES

The phrase “free and faithful in Christ” informs the questions of moral teaching. The phrase is the title of the three-volume moral theology by Bernard Häring, arguably the most significant Roman Catholic moral theologian in the twentieth century, given his writings and his teaching

of teachers at the Accademia Alfonsiana in Rome from 1949 to 1987. See Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), especially volume 1. As Häring's title indicates, moral decisions must reflect a person's understanding; otherwise a decision creates a false consciousness. At the same time, moral decisions are free only as they are informed. The task of the church is thus to inform conscience so that it is free and faithful in Christ.

On the "corruption of the best is the worst" (*corruptio optimi quae est pessima*), see Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005), xvii, 175–229.