

Episcopal decision: The confirmation of V. Gene Robinson

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By all reports the Episcopal Church's General Convention, which took the unprecedented step of confirming an openly gay man as a bishop of the church, was a remarkably civil affair. Church leaders debated one of the most divisive theological issues of our time in respectful fashion. They addressed last-minute charges of personal misconduct against the bishop-elect, V. Gene Robinson, in a way that satisfied the assembly. After the vote confirming him as the bishop of New Hampshire, Robinson and his supporters refrained from triumphalism. All were mindful that the convention's action may prompt a major split in the church. "That is the only thing that makes this not a completely joyous day for me," said Robinson.

The size of the division in Episcopal ranks, the financial implications of that split, and the turmoil and rancor created throughout the Anglican Communion and the Christian world will be closely watched by other mainline churches. Paying especially close attention will be the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which has been debating homosexuality for years, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which is in the midst of its own study of sexuality and is scheduled to vote on the inclusion of gays in 2005.

Is homosexuality a church-dividing issue? Can Christians affirm their unity in the faith and in the church while disagreeing on moral norms regarding homosexual behavior? The Episcopal Church's decisive step will soon offer vivid answers to these questions.

One of the unresolved issues made glaringly obvious by Robinson's election is the need for clarity on the church's teaching on sexual activity outside marriage. In confirming Robinson, who lives with his male partner of 13 years, the church implicitly endorsed sexual activity outside marriage. Is the next logical step an endorsement of marriage for gays, in order to conform to the church's longstanding teaching that sexual activity is reserved for marriage? Or is a "committed" gay

relationship an alternative to marriage? In that case, how are such relationships to be defined and recognized by the church? The meaning and practice of “blessing” same-sex unions, which the convention left as a local option, cannot be an afterthought to such discussion.

For a generation many mainline church leaders have regarded the exclusion of noncelibate gays from church leadership as theologically unwarranted. The traditional arguments against gay sex from scripture and philosophical tradition have not been convincing in the face of gay Christians’ witness to their experience, to their faith and to their capacity for committed relationships—and in light of Jesus’ own demonstrative inclusion of outsiders in his ministry.

Is the Episcopal Church’s action indeed a new work of the Spirit? Perhaps the best judgment on that question at this point is that of Rabbi Gamaliel, as recorded in the Book of Acts (5:38-39): “If this plan or undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow [it]—in that case you may even be found fighting against God.”