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What is underlying all this is how we are to see the Bible - we are known as Christians, not Biblians and there is good reason, for our final responsibility is to Christ, not the regulations of the Bible. I cannot discuss Christian ethics in detail today but I can recommend one of the best pieces of New Testament exegesis on the subject I know - the story of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. In this story one of the characters has a personal interview with Jesus where he rebukes him with: "Thou didst desire man's free love, that he should follow Thee freely, enticed and taken captive by Thee. In place of the rigid ancient law, man must hereafter with free heart decide for himself what is good and what is evil, having only Thy image before him as his guide." In other words it is part of Christian responsibility to work some things out for ourselves.

So what I have tried to put before you today is that first, the diocese of New Westminster has approved the blessing of same sex unions not in the interests of watering down Christian morality but in encouraging same sex couples to a life of fidelity and permanence in the costly demands of love. At the same time parishes and clergy who disagree as a matter of conscience will not be forced to do what they feel is wrong. Second, disagreement over matters of conscience does not necessarily require the splitting up of the Anglican church - from the New Testament on the Christian church has been able to encompass genuine differences on moral matters and in its history the Anglican Church has done the same. Third in the matter of whether the church can go against Scripture and tradition, the answer is we have already done it in other cases. In effect we have decided that we are not bound by the literal meaning of every regulation in the Bible - otherwise we should be demanding laws that require adulterers to be put to death by stoning - there are times when we have to see the Bible in its historical context and recognize that part of Christian responsibility is to face new situations in a responsible manner.

Well where do we go from here? Much will depend on how clearly we think things over and how much we care for others to see things from their point of view. For only if we really do love our neighbours as ourselves do we have any chance at of understanding them and being able to respect their freedom to differ from us without assuming they are *ipso facto* straying from Christ's flock. If being holier than thou is a temptation to be avoided, so is being more orthodox than thou. Personally the only objection I can see to this is that it applies to me too.

I once announced at the beginning of a sermon that I was going to preach on the somewhat controversial issues of abortion and euthanasia. One of our friends leaned across the pew to my wife and muttered, "He must be feeling suicidal this morning." But every now and then one finds that sermon topics are set for you - rather like compulsory homework on the teacher's favourite subject and today I want to deal with another contentious issue. But before I begin I would like to say two things: First, I make it a rule in preaching never to intrude into the privacy of people who are in the congregation. Nothing I am going to say is meant with anyone in particular here in mind. Yet with some contentious subjects it is hard to avoid upsetting someone - so let me preface my remarks with, if I say anything you find personal or offensive - it is not my intention; please accept my apology in advance. Second, if you do not agree with me, remember I could be wrong. It has been known to happen in the past - at least so I have been told.

Now in case you have not guessed I want to talk about the recent decision of the Diocese of New Westminster to permit the blessing of same sex unions. (I emphasize, this is a decision that applies only to the Diocese of New Westminster at this time.) This has caused some controversy and the media is having a wonderful time about how Anglicans are about to split up. What I would like to do is to take matters in a orderly fashion and see what is at issue here and whether it is all that bad.

I intend to discuss three basic issues: first, what is proposed; second, can we remain together when we disagree about serious issues, and third can we break with scripture and tradition on matters of morality?

1. What is proposed in the Diocese of New Westminster? In parishes where both the parishioners and the clergy are in agreement, a service of blessing may be held for same sex couples. This is how this service is described:

We are not compromising the Christian faith nor relativising its moral teaching. We are extending to gay and lesbian Christians the same freedom that is enjoyed by others to commit their lives to Jesus Christ together, and the same obligation to grow in the costly demands of love. We are calling them to fidelity, permanence and stability in relationships. We are offering them the support of the Christian

community as they grow into the fullness of the stature of Christ through the struggles and challenges of mutual commitment.

Parishes and clergy who prefer not to perform this service will not be required to do it; as the bishop's statement says "We have voted not to compel but to permit." In other words every effort is made to respect those whose consciences feel this step is not appropriate.

2. Not everyone is convinced this step is appropriate. This brings us to the second point I want to discuss, can we remain together when we have serious disagreements or does this mean that Anglicans will have to split up? Is it possible to remain together in the Anglican Church if we disagree about serious moral issues? As far as I can see the church has always had serious differences of opinion within its ranks. Take the history of the Episcopal Church of the United States; after the Civil War it would have been easy for the Northern bishops to have taken the line that Southern Episcopalians, having supported a regime that tried to maintain slavery, were no longer welcome in their midst. Instead the Northern bishops called a general council, invited the Southern bishops, and waited several weeks for the Southerners to show up before they started the meeting. It must be admitted that it helped that one of the Southern bishops who had been a Confederate cavalry general died before he could get to the meeting, but they did manage to hold the church together after not just differences of morality but after a long and a very bloody war. Even today there are considerable differences within the Anglican Communion; I have a good friend who is convinced that ordaining women is morally wrong; he and I are still friends, neither has read the other out of the Anglican Church, we know that in the next world we will both be enlightened about the truth and each of us hopes the other will not be too disappointed with the result. And if we go back to the New Testament there were differences of opinion in the church about whether one should observe the Jewish traditional laws - and this was not just a matter of different tastes - for Jewish Christians the Law was sacred and holy beyond almost anything else yet they eventually decided they would not require this of non-Jews for allegiance to Christ was what mattered. So the answer here is of course we can indeed remain together in the same church in good conscience when we disagree over serious moral issues which is not the same as saying we have always managed it throughout history or that we will now.

3. But suppose one says, yes, but what was at stake in the case of the Episcopal church was the mere matter of slavery; we are dealing with the really important matter of the blessing of same sex unions where we are

going against both the Bible and the long standing tradition of the church. This is my third point today - can the church go against Scripture and tradition? There are times when I wish that those who make the appeal to Bible and tradition would take a closer look at the Bible and find out what happened in church history before they start - as Alexander Pope pointed out, "A little learning is a dangerous thing; drink deep or touch not the Pierian spring." I spend my time in the useless pursuit of reading old books and I have come across an issue not too different from the one we face today. For over two hundred years there was a furious debate, within the Protestant churches at least, about the serious moral problem of whether a person whose spouse died would be permitted to marry one of their spouse's siblings. Put in the form of the question "Can a man marry his widow's sister?" the answer was easy, but in other cases there was a decision to make. In older Prayer Books you will find a section called "The table of kindred and affinity wherein whosoever are related are forbidden in scripture and our laws to marry together." Note this is an appeal to the Bible and to the tradition of the church. Amongst other rules in this table, it is laid down in no uncertain terms that a man may not marry his wife's sister or his brother's wife and there is a corresponding regulation for women. Even as late as *Iolanthe* one of the threats to the comforts of parliament was "he will prick that annual blister, marriage to deceased wife's sister." Now the table of kindred and affinity is dead right about the Bible; there are various passages in the Old Testament which are explicit about not marrying close in-laws and in the New Testament John The Baptist is imprisoned by Herod because John criticised him for marrying his brother's sister. The matter is beyond all possible, probable shadow of doubt - yet I doubt if you could fill a phone booth with people whose consciences are upset about this rejection of Scripture and traditional church practice. In fact I bet many Anglicans have never heard about this controversy, least of all the thirteen bishops who have come out against the New Westminster decision. Are we having a little trouble being consistent?

If this is not enough, take the case of the remarriage in church of divorced people whose former spouses are still living - talk about going against Scripture and tradition, yet this is fairly common practice in the Anglican Church of Canada but is still resisted in the Church of England which has not made a great deal of fuss about what we are up to. In other words there are indeed matters where we have already disagreed in good conscience with what is laid down in Scripture and tradition. It just is possible the Diocese of New Westminster is justified in saying "We are not compromising the Christian faith nor relativising its moral teaching."