

## **Diversity among Christians**

### **[Colossians 3:1-11](#)**

I recently read a novel, [The Golden Season](#) by Madeline Kay Snead. It is a coming out story. Young southern girl, Emmy, realizes she's gay and her parents are shocked. Her mom comes round but her dad has severe misgivings because it conflicts with his understanding of the gospel. He consults Pastor Ben who says

“[The Bible] makes damnation and salvation very clear. Those who turn away from Christ, as Emmy has done for the time being, are damned. And those who love the damned more than they love Christ,” he said, motioning to Steve, “Like say a father and his daughter, they're damned too. In accepting Emmy as she is now, in her current state, you're not only guaranteeing her damnation. You're solidifying your own.”

Eventually Emmy discovers that her former pastor, Pastor Sherman, has fully accepted that his own daughter is lesbian. This is his explanation:

“I think it comes down to two things Emmy really,” he said, “the desire to be *right* and the desire to be *true*.”... “When we focus on salvation- who gets saved and who gets damned – what we're really prioritizing is who is right and who is wrong.” Pastor Sherman continued... “But we ignore what it means to be *true*. So instead of loving folks, we try to get them to see why they're *wrong* and why we're right.

We've fought wars because of this. We've justified stealing humans and their lands with this logic. And in our crusade – I do not use that word lightly – to make the world right, we've lost the truth. Which is, simply, to love one another without condition, to the best of our conditional ability.”

Pop quiz – do I agree more with Pastor Ben (the first one) or Pastor Sherman?

Of course. I, and most people in the Episcopal church believe that God loves and embraces humans in all our diversity –woman, man, intersex, non-gender binary, lesbian, gay, tranz, queer, and unquestioning. We are all beloved of God and we are all equally in need of God’s grace.

But that understanding has been hard won. After millennia of thinking that God made us Male and Female with no grey areas and that sex is only ok in the context of marriage between one man and one woman, it has taken a lot of work and a lot of upheaval to get to this point.

It is often difficult for us humans to distinguish between what is God-given and what is human tradition. When British missionaries spread across the British Empire to bring word of the God of love, they took with them British habits and British clothing. They were unable to distinguish the core of the gospel from the trappings of “civilized society” and so they often saw their mission as civilizing the savages.

From our perspective today, this aspect of missionary work, this colonialization, is very unattractive and calls for our repentance.

Locally, Father Junipero Serra, a Roman Catholic Franciscan, is credited with having established the first nine Californian missions, and for this he was canonized in 2015. But Native Americans see it differently, in exchange for “salvation” they were expected to give up their indigenous culture and traditional farming methods. Those who disobeyed the fathers were flogged and those who tried to escape hunted down by Spanish soldiers. The missions were hot beds for infections like measles, against which the indigenous people had little resistance. It is estimated that there were 300,000 indigenous people living in California before the missions came but only 30,000 by 1860.<sup>i</sup>

You will have heard recent revelations about deaths in Canadian boarding schools where indigenous children were forced to go for re-education. There has been less media attention given to similar schools in this country. One of the most powerful moments at last months’ General Convention was when indigenous Episcopalians talked about

their experiences and their parents' experiences with such schools. And yes, some of them were run by Episcopalians. It was agreed to create a fact-finding commission and to employ archivists to examine the role of the Episcopal church in subjugating indigenous peoples in this way.

I seem to have wandered a long way from Pastor Ben and Pastor Sherman. But there is an important connection.

English and American missionaries, working on the Pastor Ben model of salvation only for those who get it right and damnation for the rest, have preached this as gospel truth for generations. Today, we are more on board with Pastor Sherman's generous gospel, love everybody as God does.

But we have a legacy.

This week, bishops from all around the Anglican Communion are meeting at the University of Kent in Canterbury, England. It is called the Lambeth Conference because the first ones happened at Lambeth Palace, the official residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury. And when the bishops gather there is a clash of culture and a clash of understandings of the gospel.

In the late 1990s, much of the Episcopal Church was moving towards understanding the diversity of human experience and welcoming LGBTQ members and leaders. But not everyone was on board. There were those who like Pastor Ben thought that the church was welcoming sinners, flaunting the gospel and thumbing its nose at God. They recruited like-minded bishops from countries which had been colonized to create a movement to prevent the Episcopal Church from continuing down its path to hell.

At the Lambeth conference in 1998 they passed a resolution which while declaring that homosexual persons are loved by God, also rejected "homosexual practice" as incompatible with Scripture in other words sinful and not ok. Ten years later, the 2008 Lambeth conference

reaffirmed that resolution and Bishop Gene Robinson the first openly partnered gay bishop in The Episcopal Church was not allowed to participate. But the Episcopal Church and a few other bishops held out. In subsequent years the Pastor Ben bishops continued to try to oust the Episcopal Church from the fellowship of the Anglican Communion. They formed an alliance known as the Global Anglican South or GAFCON. Many congregations and even dioceses left the Episcopal Church and formed the Anglican Church of North America.

The Anglican Communion is a remarkable forum for bringing together the former colonized with the colonizers. Ideally it is a meeting of equals for fellowship and mutual support. But that is not yet the case. Without a process of acknowledging the damage done by colonization and repentance on the part of the white colonizers it is a place of power battles and pain across difference.

The Pastor Ben churches believe that the Pastor Sherman churches have sold out to the dominant culture and that their own salvation may be in doubt if they, for example, receive communion alongside Pastor Sherman.

My friends, we who agree with Pastor Sherman, are called to take a different route, one of compassion and generosity even as we stand firm on the certainty that God's love is for everyone, totally inclusive, regardless of their color, race or sexual/gender expression. That is the path that our Episcopal bishops, including Bishop Lucinda and Bishop Mary, are attempting to walk among their colleagues at Lambeth. They are not alone, there are more and more bishops from other countries who also walk that path, but they face great opposition especially as this year our four openly gay and lesbian bishops are participating in the conference although their spouses have not been invited. Please hold them in your prayers.

The church of the first century had its own problems. Many Jewish Christians thought that Gentiles could not be Christian, and Jewish law

was interpreted to mean that it was sinful to visit with Gentiles. But today's reading from Colossians puts that idea to rest. "...you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!"

This is the healing of the church and the healing of the nations. When Christ is all in all there is no longer Pastor Ben or Pastor Sherman, no liberal or conservative, no colonizer or colonized, no gay or straight, woman, man, non-binary or tranz, no difference of skin color – all are equally beloved.

People of God, it is our task to make this a reality. Here and now in the church of today and the church of tomorrow.

Let us pray once again the Collect for today. Praying this for the bishops meeting in Canterbury as well as for ourselves and all the churches of every denomination in Los Osos and beyond.

*Let your continual mercy, O Lord, cleanse and defend your Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without your help, protect and govern it always by your goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/why-are-native-groups-protesting-catholicisms-newest-saint-180956721/>