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* The Vermont AIDS Hotline is open weekdays, 8:30-4:30.
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Spiritual Essence: A Biblical Mandate

As OITM was going to press, a report was issued chastising the Episcopal Church of the United States (ECUSA) for consecrating Gene Robinson, an openly gay man, as bishop of New Hampshire this past year. The Windsor Report is the result of a one-year study requested by the Anglican Primates, the leaders of the various churches that form the Anglican Communion, including ECUSA. The report is advisory to the Primates, and at this writing it is not clear what actions the Primates will take in response to the report at their February meeting, nor how the Episcopal Church will respond.

The report seeks concessions not just from ECUSA but also from conservative Anglican churches that have threatened schism. Its recommendations include the following:

▼ The Episcopal Church of the United States should express regret that "bonds of affection were breached" when it consecrated a bishop who would not be received by a significant number of Anglican churches.

▼ ECUSA should refrain from consecrating other bishops involved in same-sex unions.

▼ Bishops should refrain from authorizing rites blessing same-sex unions and express regret for the pain caused to others in the Communion by their authorization.

▼ Conservative bishops from outside the U.S. should stop forging relationships with disaffected American parishes and should apologize for such activities to date.

To promote dialogue within the Communion, the report asks the Episcopal Church to explain why it considers the consecration of an openly gay man to be within the bounds of scripture. Many Episcopalians have long agreed that the church should do just that. Following is an excerpt from a sermon I preached at the Episcopal Cathedral in Burlington on August 8, 2004.

The 2003 General Convention adjourned one year ago today.

At that convention, the Episcopal Church voted to endorse the consecration of an openly gay man living in a covenanted relationship with another man. This decision generated international celebration –



and international furor.

I celebrated. Our tradition is not one that articulates strict, dogmatic theologies. We are a people of prayer, whose common life and worship display to the world and to ourselves the truths we hold dear. Given that aspect of our religious life, affirming the life and ministry of an openly gay man sends a powerful message about where our church stands in its relationship to gay and lesbian people. I believe that our church did something very important in consecrating Gene Robinson. At the same time, I don't think we have done nearly enough to explain to the world why we did this.

Evangelical fundamentalists assert that homosexuality is condemned by the Bible. They say that in embracing lesbians and gay men in our midst, the Episcopal Church has rejected the authority of scripture. They have banged this drum so loudly for so long that it is common in newspapers and on the street to hear the word "Christian" used as a synonym for "homophobic." It is possible, even likely, that even those who support gay rights believe that the Episcopal Church has side-stepped scripture in affirming the value of lesbians and gay men. I wonder what these folks make of our actions. Perhaps they note our British heritage and conclude that we are simply being "polite."

The truth is that the Bible does not condemn the actions of General Convention – it demands the actions of General Convention. And it is high time that those of us who believe so, say so.

Where do I hear this biblical mandate? Matthew 22:34-40 is one of the most important passages in the Gospel. One of the Pharisees, a lawyer, asks, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the

greatest?" Jesus responds, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Jesus sets up love of God and neighbor as a litmus test for every other commandment in scripture. This means that if your interpretation of the law leads you to treat your neighbor badly, something is wrong. Jesus puts loving one's neighbor right up there with loving God. In parable after parable, Jesus asks his followers to wrap their minds around the questions, "Who is my neighbor?" and "What does it mean to love him or her?"

Some fundamentalists argue that they recognize gay people as their neighbors, and that convincing us of the error of our ways is how they demonstrate their love for us. Let me tell you, there is a difference between persecution and love. When millions of people rise up to say, "Please take your boot off of my neck," it is time for those wearing the boots to recognize the face of God in the face of the person under their feet, and get off.

Many people talk about homosexuality as an "issue." But when gay people seek justice, we are not talking about an "issue." We are talking about our lives. How do we get past the idea that this debate is simply a matter of competing theological claims?

Jesus offers some guidance here. In the sixth chapter of Luke, Jesus says, "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit." Matthew's version says this: "Beware of false prophets ... You will know them by their fruits."

It is not a reach to say that homophobic theology drives the persecution of lesbians and gay men. Talk with almost anyone who thinks gay people are immoral. In no time at all, you will hear appeals to God and the Bible. This is bad fruit.

There is nothing like religion to make people feel fully justified in perpetrating evil. And the evils perpetrated upon sexual minorities are legion, from the gay teenagers who have been thrown out of their homes >>