

Salvation Through Christ Alone: Not a Question for Debate

READER'S VIEWPOINT

By Robert G. Certain

On the final day for deputies to submit legislation for consideration at the 75th General Convention of The Episcopal Church, a resolution titled "Salvation Through Christ Alone" (D058) was entered. The Dispatch of Business Committee chose to refer it to the Cognate Committee on Evangelism for consideration.

When it came to us as the final piece of legislation we would consider, I was concerned about the public perception of any debate on the resolution. No matter what we did with it, a bad headline would result. Introduced late into the convention, the debate would be limited to about 15-20 minutes. Since our procedure is to alternate between those for and those against, it would appear to people unfamiliar with our procedures that the debate indicated a major division in the church. That parliamentary situation would give an erroneous picture to an outside observer.

I moved to request the house to discharge us from considering the resolution because it had already been dealt with at previous General Conventions. That motion was passed by a large majority of the committee, and I expected it to go to the consent calendar where debate is not allowed. However, it appeared on the debate calendar instead.

When it came to the floor of the house, the debate, which consisted of four speakers before the question

was moved, was on the motion to "discharge from further consideration." It was never on the subject matter itself. Any interpretation of the action of the committee or the House of Deputies to the contrary is erroneous and misleading. The house agreed with the committee to discharge the resolution because it had already been dealt with at previous conventions.

When I rose to explain the committee's action, here is what I said in response to each Resolved:

No matter what we did with it, a bad headline would result.

Resolved, the House of Bishops concurring, That the 75th General Convention of the Episcopal Church declares its unchanging commitment to Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the only name by which any person may be saved (Article XVIII);

First, this is an inappropriate subject for legislation. It is part of the historic doctrine of the Church, and such cannot be changed except in Ecumenical Council, the last of which was held in the 10th century.

It was acted upon by previous General Conventions in each edition of the Book of Common Prayer (and by the English Church since 1549). In the prayer book we have all of the 39 Articles of Faith (save one dealing with the English monarchy); we have the Apostles and Nicene Creeds; we have the baptismal covenant; and we have the statement signed by all ordinands that we "do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation."

And be it further Resolved, That we acknowledge the

solemn responsibility placed upon us to share Christ with all persons when we hear His words, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6);

This, too, is covered in the baptismal covenant, as well as in the welcome of the newly baptized: "We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood."

These words are affirmed at every baptism and every renewal of baptismal promises.

And be it further Resolved, That we affirm that in Christ there is both the substitutionary essence of the Cross and the manifestation of God's unlimited and unending love for all persons;

First, I don't have any idea what "substitutionary essence of the Cross" refers to.

"Substitutionary Atonement" is one interpretation of the doctrine of the Atonement, but not the only one. This Resolved should go to the House of Bishops' Committee on Theology, not the Cognate Committee on Evangelism.

Regardless of the theological meaning of the words, the structure of the English sentence is very strange, since it suggests that the cross alone accomplishes the Atonement and must logically be a person of the Trinity. In fact, Jesus is the One who accomplishes the Atonement on the cross. He, not the cross, is the sacrifice. Jesus is God, not the cross on which he was crucified.

I think this particular Resolved is both bad English and bad theology.

And be it further Resolved, That we renew our dedication to be faithful witnesses to all persons of the saving love of God perfectly and uniquely revealed in Jesus and upheld by the full testimony of Scripture.

This final Resolved is covered in nearly every liturgy contained in the Book of Common Prayer.

I ended by stating my embarrassment that anyone would introduce a debate on the substance of this resolution on the floor of the House of Deputies. The commitment to Jesus as Lord is not debatable, it is the foundation (and first creed) of the Church since New Testament times. The house should discharge the Committee on Evangelism (and itself) from further consideration of this resolution because it has already been dealt with at previous General Conventions. Jesus is, and always has been, Lord. □

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