

An Appeal to Archbishop Eliud Wabukala, Primate of Kenya and Chairman of the GAFCON's Primates' Council, an Open Letter:

Your Grace:

I am deeply pained by the accusation you level against the Scottish Episcopal Church and my own, the Episcopal Church of the United States, in your *Pastoral Letter 2015* to the Faithful of GAFCON and friends.

* <http://gafcon.org/2015/08/06/chairmans-july-august-pastoral-letter-2015/>

You say that we have been “listening to the world rather than listening to the Scriptures and the witness of the Church through two millennia.” I appeal to you for understanding.

I do not deny that we have been listening to the world. We have. But I do deny that we have been doing so *rather than* listening to the Scriptures and the witness of the church through two millennia.

I have been a priest for 62 years and so have lived through many changes in world and church. I have not found them easy. The process has been very difficult. I have often found myself in doubt about my decisions — Am I just going along with the world? Am I just providing complacent Episcopalians excuses for their worldliness? Am I reading my opinions into the Scriptures instead of hearing the Word of God?

To each question my answer has been no, and remains no. I think that I have been prayerfully and conscientiously seeking the will of God.

I will tell my personal story in some detail— how I faced the changes concerning divorce and remarriage, the role of women, and those concerning sexuality. I want you to see the struggle that I and many other Episcopalians have gone through in making our decisions. I want you to see that many of us have indeed been listening carefully to the Scriptures in the same way as our forebears through two millennia.

To follow in the footsteps of our forebears has been important enough to me that I have done careful studies of four crises of decision in the life of the church in order to see how those decisions were made. (You will find those studies on my website, warnerwhite.org, under the title *How Those Christians Fight!*) The four studies concern these controversies: the inclusion of gentiles in the church, the Arian controversy, the controversy concerning usury, and the controversy concerning divorce and remarriage. The first two controversies arise from within the church; the second two are world-driven. The inclusion controversy gives us an ideal to follow. The Arian controversy shows that ideal marred by sin, but somehow managing, nevertheless, to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The world-driven controversies show us prayerful, careful

listening, but also messiness, sin, incompleteness and doubt. The world-driven controversies show us fallible Christians trying to listen to Scripture and tradition.

Thus, I do not ask you to decide that I am right in the decisions I have made. My appeal is that you recognize that many of us Episcopalians have conscientiously tried to listen to the Scriptures and the witness of the church, in the same way as our forebears.

I will start with the pattern of change-making I see in the early church. Then I will look at the decision concerning usury and its results for us today. Then I will look at decisions in which I have myself taken part.

In the studies I mention above I speak of *controversies*. In this appeal I am concerned with *change*. That difference in language has revealed something I had not noticed before. Previously I had called the inclusion controversy the first great controversy of the church. And that is certainly true. But it is not the first great change. The first great change is the birth of the church itself!

I find the following steps in this first change-process —

Peter and the other followers begin with a *life-vision* given them by Scripture and tradition. In particular, they expect the coming of the Messiah.

As a result of this vision and their encounter with Jesus they make a *change* — they commit themselves to him as the Messiah.

This change brings about *new experiences* — Jesus' teaching, death, resurrection and ascension, and, finally, the gift of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

Throughout this process as well as at its end, they listen to the Scriptures and find *warrant* for the change they are making.

On the Day of Pentecost Peter declares that they are fulfilling the prophecy of Joel: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams." (Acts 2:17)

Finally, this scriptural warrant modifies their life-vision. To cite Joel's prophecy as warrant modifies the vision dramatically — the last days have arrived!

The inclusion controversy follows the same pattern with these differences — there is controversy this time, the change adopted by Peter and later by Paul involves a break with current tradition and adoption of a new tradition derived from Scripture, there is an authoritative conclusion to the process by a council of the church.

These two processes of change show us an ideal. This is how we are called as Christians

to deal with change. The Arian controversy shows the same pattern carried out in a far from ideal way. It is marred by malice, slander, violence, intolerance, pettiness, and many other forms of sin. But somehow, despite all that, the Fathers are led by the Spirit to a right conclusion.

Now we come to a world-driven change, widely accepted in the church, about which I have very serious doubts — our change in teaching about usury.

The important element in the beginning vision is, in this case, its universality — the church is to include all humanity. Thus the Old Testament command to lend freely to one's neighbor in need and not take any interest, now applies to everyone, not just fellow Jews.

But over the centuries as business and commerce grow in the Christian world, loans are not so much made to a neighbor in need, but to a partner in commerce. The lender sees himself as rightly expecting to profit from the loan. Production of goods demands capital and capital will not be provided without incentive.

At first, various expedients are devised to provide the incentive and yet keep the command against usury. But as the world moves more and more into the capitalist system, the expedients become more and more awkward. Christians begin simply to redefine the term "usury." Where originally it meant the charging of interest, any interest at all, it is redefined to mean the charging of excessive interest.

John Calvin examines biblical texts concerning loans and reinterprets them as allowing interest so long as it is not excessive. His teaching becomes widely accepted.

Loans are thus no longer viewed as taking place among neighbors. Instead they take place among competitors in a world of commerce.

Benjamin Nelson captures this change succinctly in the title of his book, *The Idea of Usury: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood* (1949, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press). The world is no longer a community of brothers and sisters but the impersonal realm of individual and corporate competition.

Once this secular vision becomes paramount the stage is set for the drama I see playing out today in my life as a Western Christian — world and church pushing one another back and forth. Sometimes the church drives the world into change — think slavery and civil rights for African-Americans. In these cases the authoritative decision is made in civil law. Sometimes both world and church drive change — think the role of women, divorce and remarriage, the mores of sexuality. Authoritative decision is made in both civil and ecclesiastical law.

This is a revolutionary change. Modern Western Christians are born into a split life-vision. On the one hand, we live every day in a secular world of competitors and people of other beliefs, and, on the other hand, on Sundays and other occasions we live briefly in our Christian community. It's a split and confused vision for guiding our lives.

Another characteristic of the usury change is its incompleteness. It crept into western life little by little. Church teaching and practice changed little by little. No council solemnly considered it and rendered an authoritative decision. There are few statements concerning it from church bodies. I pray that we Christians will reconsider it and press for humane changes.

This change in teaching has opened the door to abuse of the poor. The minimum wage-earner in need is no longer my neighbor; so I can lend to him at usurious rates. In the United States we have what are called "payday" loans, in which minimum wage-earners take their paychecks to lenders for immediate cash. The interest rates can be as high as 39%!

I see the changes I have had to deal with in my lifetime as changes in the movement for *human fulfillment*. For several centuries now we in the West have been redefining human relations to this end. The first major event in the movement was the abolition of the slave trade and slavery. Then followed such movements as those for equal rights for women, remarriage after divorce, civil rights for minorities, the ordination of women, and same-sex marriage.

I am now going to talk about my personal experiences, my feelings, my struggles. I do so because changes seeking human fulfillment are highly personal, they affect the personal lives of millions. My personal experiences are examples of what those changes mean and of how we Episcopalians have been arriving at our decisions.

In 1953 as a brand new priest in the Diocese of Chicago I was plunged into the midst of the divorce and remarriage struggle when I became priest-in-charge of a small suburban parish. At that time the Episcopal Church had been fighting over divorce and remarriage for many years and had arrived at a very awkward compromise. I had to tell couples who had remarried after divorce without having their previous marriage annulled that they could not take communion now, but if they attended church faithfully for a year I could petition the bishop to let them back in.

We were trying to reconcile the irreconcilable. Marriages were indissoluble. So a civil divorce did not dissolve your marriage. If you married a second time, you were living in sin and could not take communion. But if you attended church faithfully, we would let you back in. Weird.

This process was not only weird, it was ungracious. We all felt the gross dissonance with Christian love — parish clergy, bishops, and, most of all, those in the pews. The result was that by 1973 we Episcopalians had had enough. Twenty-one memorials and petitions from dioceses from all over the church were presented to General Convention asking for change. We responded by recognizing divorce and permitting remarriage.

I have said I felt ungracious. I also found myself defending second marriages, trying to help them work. One case in particular was decisive for me. The husband in a second marriage came to me asking my approval for him to abandon his present wife and children and go off with another woman. I did not give him that approval. By all logic I should have been urging this husband and wife to return to previous marriages. That seemed to me impossible. It seemed right to me for them to try to make the best of the present circumstances.

I should add that the decision concerning divorce and remarriage is highly personal for me in that it affects my own family and many friends. To take a hard line on divorce and remarriage would mean inflicting grave hurt on those I love. This is the case for every one of these human fulfillment changes, and it is true not only for me but for almost everybody. We are talking here about our families, friends, and neighbors.

I entered this change process when it was already in its final stage. In Western Christianity it had been preceded by some centuries of change in the nature of marriage. In 19th century America, as secular divorce increased, the Episcopal Church at first responded conservatively — divorce was permissible only in the case of adultery, and only the innocent party could remarry. But as divorce became still more common among us, the church examined Scripture and tradition. In its proceedings General Convention took note of the opinions pro and con of biblical scholars, and the practice of the Eastern Orthodox Church. In 1937 a pamphlet consisting of articles by various scholars was prepared for Convention.

This process proceeds from a life-vision that includes world and church as already described. In particular it includes a vision of human fulfillment. Both church and world underwent change in marriage practice. We Episcopalians (among others) struggled with the change. We prayed, looked at Scripture and tradition, and finally made a decision.

Decisions concerning the role of women have followed a similar path. They are both world-driven and church-driven. There have been and are many secular agitators for change, and we have a cadre of Christian women who fit in that category. I cite, for example, the four whose feast the Episcopal Church keeps on July 20 — Episcopalians Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Amelia Bloomer, and former slaves Sojourner Truth and Harriet Ross Tubman. In 1848 the first two organized the first Women's Rights Convention in this country. The second two were popular and very effective speakers for

the equality not only of African-Americans but also women.

I will say no more about the women's movement and our decisions concerning the role of women. It followed and is still following a path similar to the one concerning divorce and remarriage. I want to focus, instead, on our decisions concerning homosexuality and same-sex marriage.

The process is much the same as those above. Once again it involved important personal relationships. As times changed, more gays and lesbians came out of the closet, and so our decisions had faces and friendships attached — and, in my case, relationships within my extended family. Almost all of us saw the effects of our decisions on friends and relatives.

There was much biblical debate — many books and articles pro and con. The best biblical study of the Christian decision to accept same-sex marriage that I have found comes from the late Walter Wink. (<http://www.christianadvice.net/homosexuality-and-the-bible-dr-walter-wink/>) Although Professor Wink was a biblical scholar well equipped in the scientific, historical-critical method of biblical exegesis that prevails in most American theological seminaries, he attacked that method early in his career saying, “Historical biblical criticism is bankrupt.” So he approaches Scripture reverently, conservatively, and with great learning.

Professor Wink examines every biblical reference to homosexuality and finds three which “unequivocally condemn homosexual behavior.” The first two are Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, both of which “leave no room for maneuvering. Persons committing homosexual acts are to be executed.” Wink rejects these texts on the grounds that we Western Christians — at least most of us — are unwilling to execute people for committing homosexual acts.

That leaves us with just one unequivocal reference, which Professor Wink says, contains “Paul's unambiguous condemnation of homosexual behavior.”

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:26-27)

The professor advances a contextual argument as follows: In this passage Paul is not speaking of persons who are by nature homosexual, but of heterosexuals who violate their nature by engaging in homosexual acts. Therefore, since this text is not about homosexuals, it does not condemn same-sex marriage.

Whatever one thinks about the above argument, it is at least clear that Scripture is being taken seriously.

The above argument, be it noted, does not support same-sex relationships; it only seeks to show that Paul was not speaking against them by gays and lesbians. In support of same-sex marriage Professor Wink advances the love ethic of Jesus. “We can challenge both gays and straights,” he says, “to question their behaviors in the light of love and the requirements of fidelity, honesty, responsibility, and genuine concern for the best interests of the other and of society as a whole. Christian morality, after all, is not an iron chastity belt for repressing urges, but a way of expressing the integrity of our relationship with God.”

This is the ground advanced by former President of Ireland Mary McAleese concerning her decision to defy church leaders and campaign in favor of same-sex marriage during the 2015 referendum — “What infuses me, what is the essence of my being, is my faith in Christ ... And it is the love of Christ and his offer of mercy to the world, the sense that every single person is a child of God, it is that which infuses me, gives me the outlook I have on the world.”

<http://ncronline.org/news/global/former-irish-president-mcaleese-discusses-her-decision-defy-church-leaders> Whether she is right or wrong President McAleese is clearly listening to Scripture.

Thus, I believe we Western Christians stand acquitted of not listening to Scripture and the witness of the church through two millennia. Our decision-making process is that of our forebears. Instead of our not listening I believe that what has happened in the Western world is a gradual fulfilling of Jesus’ vision for his children. Paul proclaimed that “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28) I believe we have been fulfilling that vision of Scripture.

I believe also that African cultures should in the long run follow the same path. However, I hold this view tentatively. I know too little about Africa to advance strongly held judgments. It is possible that an African culture that has not accepted the impersonal world of competition we Westerners accepted in our decisions concerning usury is closer to the gospel than ours. Be that as it may, your grace, I ask you to withdraw your charge. I ask you to recognize that we Episcopalians, American and Scottish, have tried our gospel best to deal with the conundrums of modern Western life.

I want you and us to remain in communion. I want you and us to learn about each other. I am ashamed to know so little about Africa. It is time I learned. I hope Africans will seek to learn about us also.

I am posting this Open Letter on my website, warnercwhite.org, and submitting it for publication on Anglicanism.org.

Respectfully in Christ,

The Rev'd. Dr. Warner C. White
12 Harbor Watch Road
Burlington, Vermont 05401
warnercwhite@yahoo.com
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